COUPLE IDENTITY WORK:

Collaborative Couplehood, Gender Inequalities, and Power in Naming

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The study of baby naming is valuable for understanding how gender inequality is reproduced in families. Often treated as an event, baby naming also represents an important social and cultural process that can reveal gendered dynamics in couple decision-making. Baby naming, which represents a highly visible and symbolic family milestone, is a strategic site in which to examine how couple identities are constructed—for self, partner, and others—through the naming process and through stories parents tell of how they named the baby. Drawing on 46 interviews with U.S. Mexican-origin heterosexual parents, we expose tensions that result when practices do not align with a desired (egalitarian) couple identity and detail the ensuing cognitive, emotion, and narrative labor that parents—primarily women—perform to reconcile inconsistencies. We introduce the concept of couple identity work, or the work involved in creating and projecting a desired impression of a relationship for multiple audiences, to provide a theoretical framework for these gendered dynamics. We show how couple identity work is enacted—and power expressed—through men's and women's strategies of action/inaction and storytelling, and how this work reproduces and obscures gendered power and inequality in the intimate context of baby naming.

Plain Language Summary

Gender Inequality in Couple Decision-Making About Baby Names

The study of baby naming is valuable for understanding how gender inequality occurs in couple decision-making. Baby naming represents a highly visible and important family milestone which increases the stakes of couples' decisions. In addition, the stories people tell about how they named their babies can reflect the way they want to be seen in society, for example, as a couple that makes decisions together versus a couple where the husband makes important family decisions with little to no input from his wife. We analyze interviews with 46 U.S. Mexican-origin heterosexual parents to understand how they made the important decision of what to name their baby. We find that, even though women do more work researching baby names and trying to come to an agreement with their partners, men have more control over the naming process. We also find that both parents tell stories about how they named their babies in a way that downplays men's power and makes them appear as an egalitarian couple.

"I guess her name is Cleopatra," remarked actress Christina Ricci after her husband, Mark Hampton, announced the name of their daughter on social media when Christina was recovering from childbirth. As Christina was being prepared for a cesarean section, she and Mark were discussing names but did not arrive at a decision. Christina made clear her intention to continue the conversation, saying, "We'll figure this out later." But there was no "later" before Mark's public announcement. In a televised interview,[1] Christina appears to cover for her husband's disregard for her wishes to arrive at a joint decision. She refers to Mark's "excitement" as the reason he preemptively posted the name without consulting her, and legitimized the name by referring to it as "a queen's name." In doing so, Christina simultaneously shores up the relationship publicly and papers over a gendered power play.

This baby-naming story features noteworthy themes we pursue in this article, principally how couples engage in *couple identity work*, or the work involved in creating and projecting a desired impression—for self, partner, and others—of the relationship, through practice and storytelling. In the Ricci–Hampton pair, we witness attempts at collaboration but also see traditional forms of patriarchy surface, including what we refer to as "hijacking" (men toppling women's power in crucial moments) and the ensuing work to restore a couple's equilibrium and identity as collaborative. This couple identity work serves to reproduce and obscure gendered

power and inequality, even in the least suspected of places, a symbolism of the union itself: a child's name.

As a publicly visible and highly symbolic event, baby naming provides a critical window into gender inequality and power negotiations associated with the creation and projection of a collaborative couple identity. Drawing on 46 in-depth interviews with predominantly middle-class Mexican-American heterosexual parents, we show how egalitarian gender ideology informs expectations about couplehood and influences how parents go about naming their children and what stories they tell about the process. Baby naming exposes tensions when parents' practices do not meet their identities as collaborative couples, as well as the gendered work required to smooth over such tensions for the benefit of the couple identity. In the literature review that follows, we cover the subfields pertaining to our case: gender inequality in the family, couple identity, and gendered social expectations.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Gender Inequality and Power in the Family

A vast gender literature reveals deep inequalities operating within U.S. families. Scholars have documented different forms of unequal labor, such as household labor (Daminger 2020; Hochschild 2003), emotion work (DeVault 1999; Erickson 2005; Hochschild 2003; Wingfield 2021), and mental or cognitive labor (Bass 2015; Daminger 2019). Household labor refers to physical labor such as cooking and cleaning; "emotion work" is "the act of trying to change in degree or quality an emotion or feeling" (Hochschild 1979, 561) for self or others (Erickson 2005; Rao 2017); and "mental work" or "cognitive labor" involves forecasting and attempting to satisfy family needs (Bass 2015; Daminger 2019). Studies of family labor have focused largely on dynamics *internal* to the family unit and only hinted at couple identities and the public dimension of family presentation (for an exception, see Edwards 2004). Our concept of *couple identity work* represents a previously unspecified, overarching form of labor, which encompasses emotion, mental/cognitive, and narrative labor, and is leveraged for the purpose of constructing a couple identity that meets gendered social expectations inside *and* outside the home.

Gender ideology informs family relationships, labor, and the stories people tell about them (Daminger 2020; Dema-Moreno 2009; Hochschild 2003; Lamont 2020). Research on gender attitudes has identified a trend

toward egalitarianism—an ideological orientation that expects equal power in relationships and joint orientation to the home (Hochschild 2003)—but also increased gender ambivalence marked by the coexistence of egalitarian beliefs in the public sphere and traditional beliefs in the private sphere (Lamont 2020; Scarborough, Sin, and Risman 2019). To reconcile gaps between espoused gender ideology and family practices, couples create "myths" (Hochschild 2003) and deploy "degendering" or "choice" narratives (Daminger 2020; Lamont 2020) to reframe family practices in a way that forefronts agency but obscures gender inequality. Women, in particular, develop strategies to manage their emotions and maintain their relationships in the face of a clash between their ideals and structural inequality (Hochschild 2003; Lamont 2020; Rao 2017; Wong 2017). We argue that women and men practice collaborative couple identity work not only to weather their relationship, but also to garner public approval given that social conventions—which increasingly favor egalitarianism (Daminger 2020; Horowitz and Fetterolf 2020; Scarborough, Sin, and Risman 2019; Villicana, Garcia, and Biernat 2017)—exert pressure, especially on women, to conform to appropriate gender and family behavior (Edwards 2004; Lamont 2020; Pedulla and Thébaud 2016; Villicana, Garcia, and Biernat 2017).

Gender scholars have identified structural changes as a driving factor behind couples' need to develop new strategies to manage their family relationships. Hochschild (2003) points to a rise in the number of dual-income couples and a lengthened work week as sources of increased household tension and impetus for the creation of "family myths." More recently, Rao (2017) emphasizes how women's emotion work is shaped by the changing labor market their husbands encounter; Wong (2017) examines how the increase in dual-career families challenges couples' ability to maintain egalitarian desires in the context of job relocation decisions; and Wingfield (2021) discusses how macrostructural economic shifts have affected emotional labor. While this research has provided critical insights into how couples adapt to external pressures, we show how unequal gender dynamics and reconciliation strategies also manifest in contexts largely insulated from direct economic impacts. In this way, our work is similar to Lamont's (2020) research on the gendered norms of courtship yet extends it by showing how gender inequality continues into family life through the presentation of collaborative couplehood.

The study of how gendered processes, including intra-couple dynamics, reproduce inequality requires a focus on women *and* men's actions (Wong 2021). To contextualize power within couples, we draw on

Komter's (1989) work on power processes and mechanisms embedded in men and women's strategies to create or block change. Specifically, we show how two forms of power—manifest and latent—infiltrate the baby-naming process. Manifest power surfaces in "visible outcomes such as attempts at change, conflicts, and strategies," whereas latent power prevents conflict when "the needs and wishes of the more powerful person are anticipated" or when resignation occurs "in anticipation of a negative reaction or fear of jeopardizing the marital relationship" (Komter 1989, 192). These forms of power slow change toward relationship equality by maintaining the status quo. Whereas Komter showed how "hidden power" is expressed through men and women's attempts to realize change in various aspects of their relationships, we examine how power is expressed and negotiated through women's and men's strategies of action and inaction surrounding the construction of a collaborative couple identity.

Whereas the literature on family labor has focused on household needs, we emphasize women's and men's strategies in attending to their *couple identity* needs, paying particular attention to power dynamics and the mental/cognitive, emotion, and narrative work performed to cultivate and outwardly project a desired couple identity. *Couple identity work* has not been a central empirical focus, nor has it been theorized as a fundamental component of family-based labor, despite its significance to family dynamics.

Couple Identities: Couple Identity Work and Storytelling

Sociological literature has not deeply explored the cultivation and performance of *couple identities* and related gender dynamics. Instead, couple identity or "we-ness" has been the domain of psychology and family therapy. Couple identity in social psychology is defined as "the degree to which one person includes both the partner and the relationship into one's self-concept, thus perceiving a feeling of connection and we-ness" (Pagani et al. 2020, 259). "We-ness" is heralded as a form of interdependence and is viewed as a valuable element of couple relationships (Reid et al. 2006). This perspective concentrates on "closeness, sense of mutuality, and reciprocal interactivity [as] core to we-ness" (Reid et al. 2006, 245), bypassing the possibility of conflict as emergent from within. "We-ness" establishes a close bond between partners that positively predicts relationship satisfaction (Cruwys et al. 2023) and fosters mutual investment and resilience (Alea, Singer, and Labunko 2015; Gildersleeve

et al. 2017). We interrogate the concept of "we-ness" sociologically with two goals: first, to investigate the *gendered work* that couples do to construct, sustain, and project their couple identity; and second, to explore tension, power, and inequality within collaborative couplehood, and assess how conflict is managed—and by whom—if and when it emerges.

In this study, we elucidate couple identity construction as an ongoing interaction intended to solidify a particular brand of "we," while also attending to the "dark side of relationships," or the "unpleasant, irritating, destructive, and painful aspects," that has received less attention (Felmlee and Sprecher 2000, 371). "We-ness" misses an opportunity to consider how partners, as individuals, try to meet their own goals *within a couple*, and conceals the work involved in creating actual or perceived alignment. A sociological perspective trades an overriding notion of "we-ness" as connectivity (Merrill and Afifi 2017; Pagani et al. 2020) for an analysis of gendered power in interaction.

Our concept of *couple identity work* refers to how individuals want their relationship to be understood by themselves and viewed by others, and is performed through narratives about the couple, such as how they named their baby. It represents a form of "impression management" (Goffman [1956] 1973), yet extends the traditional concept by treating the couple as a dimension of self (Pagani et al. 2020) and by highlighting the gendered labor and power dynamics behind *couple* performances.

Storytelling is a central conduit of couple identity work. Stories are primary mechanisms for cultivating identities; they are influenced by cultural narratives, serve as vehicles of meaning, and help create a sense of desired self (Lamont 2020; Zussman 2012). Telling couplehood stories is fundamental to couple identity work because "stories crystallize feelings and qualities of relationships" (Strong, Rogers-de Jong, and Merritt 2014, 398). With names being an "important vehicle representing identity as a couple in broader society" (Cerchiaro 2017, 13), the significance of naming stories is magnified. Moreover, naming stories represent strategic sites to understand how public performances are used to showcase intra-couple gender dynamics. They provide a window into couple performances, as parents are often asked to tell the story of how they named their baby. Because parents can be called upon to tell "their story" at any moment, it can be difficult to brush aside or repress inconvenient truths. This social convention also incentivizes parents to pre-craft a story that is consistent with how they want their relationship to be viewed (see Lamont 2020). Baby-naming stories spotlight the power of emotion work as naming a baby is supposed to represent a sacred life moment *for the couple*;

if things go awry, intense emotion management is often necessary as difficult moments are relived through repeated storytelling.

Our contribution to the couple identity literature is peeling back the "we" to examine who is doing the work to produce collaborative couplehood and what these gendered strategies entail. We critique the assumption of alignment and positivity when one is part of a "we" and intervene to introduce how "we-ness" can obscure and naturalize gender inequality. We show how baby naming—at the nexus of gender, family, and couple identity—can become contested terrain where individuals in a couple maneuver with gendered power and then narratively massage gender inequities to maintain the relationship and a collaborative couple identity.

Gendered Investments in Couple Identity Work and Baby Naming

Gender socialization creates uneven pressures—and by extension, investments—for women and men around couplehood and family. The concepts of gendered cultural schemas, role identities, and gendered selves help explain why women often take on gendered responsibilities when they become wives and mothers, and have stronger emotional attachment than do men to these responsibilities (Blair-Loy 2005; Carter 2014; Erickson 2005). Socialization from multiple sources encourages women to invest in family, setting up family as priority for women by cultural decree. In contrast, being a man is largely defined through autonomy and financial provision (Hochschild 2003). Consequently, women often invest in family labor with higher levels of energy, meaning, and emotion, because it is tied to their moral worth and identities as wives and mothers in a way it is not tied to men's (DeVault 1999; Gerson 2002; Hays 1996; Vasquez-Tokos 2017). Women's identities and labor are also more closely tied to their *relationships*; women engage in emotion work to attend to men's needs, often at the expense of their own, and are largely responsible for the "emotional climate within a relationship" (Erickson 2005, 338; Rao 2017). These social pressures can result in sustaining patriarchal practices such as patrilineal surnaming (Nugent 2010).

Family scholars have documented the rise of companionate marriage, a model that purports gender equality, wherein spouses love each other deeply, make decisions jointly, and support each other's goals (Coontz 2006). This model coincides with the cultural image of the "New Man"—an involved father and egalitarian husband (Hondagneu-Sotelo and Messner 1997). In cultivating and presenting an image of collaborative

couplehood, egalitarian-aspiring women and men reap identity benefits: Women can claim they are married to a "rare new man" (Hochschild 2003, 42–43), and men can benefit from being viewed as one of these men. Both can also claim membership in a companionate relationship. However, women have more at stake in terms of social rewards *and* sanctions, because gender schemas continue to closely tie women's identities to family life, and women are more frequently and harshly judged within this gendered framework (Edwards 2004; Villicana, Garcia, and Biernat 2017). As Lamont (2020) shows, women's transgression of gendered social conventions surrounding dating and marriage can lead to peer stigma and relationship destabilization.

Baby naming activates identities as parents and associated social expectations. Intensive parenting—a morally tinged model of parenting that encourages parents, primarily mothers, to spend tremendous amounts of energy in raising their children (Hays 1996)—has become a dominant model among the U.S. middle class and has created "intensive naming" expectations (Sue 2023). We would thus expect a high level of parental—particularly maternal—investment in the foundational parenting task of baby naming. Mothers' investment in first names may be further heightened by the standard U.S. heterosexual practice of patrilineal surnaming (Johnson and Scheuble 2002), a patriarchal practice that ensures "male privilege of a continuous identity" (Nugent 2010, 500). In addition to these gendered and classed norms, race/ethnicity may factor into baby naming and couple identity work.

Consistent with the robust literature on U.S. white heterosexual couples (e.g., Daminger 2020; Erickson 2005; Hays 1996), the much more limited research on heterosexual Mexican-American (or Latino) couples has documented gender inequality in the family (e.g., Golding 1990; Sayer and Fine 2011). However, much of this research leans heavily on cultural explanations and portrays Mexican-origin families as wholly traditional, which has drawn criticism for its static, homogenizing, and essentialist tendencies, and for overlooking the influence of structural and contextual factors in family dynamics (Hondagneu-Sotelo and Messner 1997; Pinto and Ortiz 2018; Smith, forthcoming). Research challenging these homogenizing conceptualizations highlights the significant *variation* within Mexican-origin populations (Alba, Jiménez, and Marrow 2014; Telles and Sue 2019; Vasquez 2011). Nevertheless, the race/ethnicity of first names has been shown to be an important consideration among middle-class Mexican Americans (Sue 2023), which may increase the gravity of first naming decisions among this subpopulation. For parents more generally,

baby naming may illuminate gendered power dynamics because of its symbolic importance.

Nevertheless, baby naming has not been leveraged to explore couple identities, storytelling, and gendered couple negotiations. When gender in naming has been addressed, the focus has been on children's gender in naming (Lieberson 2000; Parada 2016; Sue and Telles 2007), patrilineal surnaming for children (Johnson and Scheuble 2002; Nugent 2010), marital name change (Hamilton, Geist, and Powell 2011), and the role of names in "doing gender" (Pilcher 2017). Whereas these studies illuminate the role of gender in naming *outcomes*, they have not examined *couple identity work* surrounding the first naming *process*. We thus extend the literature on the relationship between baby naming and gender by focusing on how parents negotiate first names in a way that expresses and reproduces gender inequality in egalitarian-inspiring relationships.

METHODS

The data come from a sample of 72 in-depth interviews (conducted between 2008 and 2016) with ethnically Mexican heterosexual mothers and fathers in Los Angeles, California. The first author identified participants through personal networks, online parent forums, and snowball sampling. Participants needed to have at least one child who was 5 years old or younger to participate. Although there was no compensation for study participation, parents readily volunteered. Most interviews took place in respondents' homes. Interviews were audiorecorded, with consent, and lasted between 30 and 90 min. The main purpose of the study was to assess how parents decide on the ethnicity of children's names and to examine their decision-making process. In this article, we focus on the latter.

We sought gender and class variation in our sample. Class was determined based on multiple measures, including education, occupation, income, neighborhood, residence, and household amenities. This resulted in a breakdown of working ($n = 23$), lower-middle (10), middle (34), and upper-middle (5) class respondents. We interviewed 40 mothers and 32 fathers. Although we did not specifically recruit couples, there were 14 total couples in the sample; five couples were interviewed together and nine couples were interviewed separately. We analyzed these interviews at the individual as well as at the couple level. The dynamics we identified cut across interview formats.

The study of couple identity work is well suited to in-depth qualitative investigation, which sheds light on social processes and meaning-making. In the interviews we asked respondents to walk us through their naming process for each child, including when parents started thinking about first and middle names, if and how they created a pool of potential names, how they negotiated names, and how they came to a final decision. Although narratives may not provide accurate representation of events because of faulty memory or respondents "stretching the truth to support their preferred narrative" (Daminger 2019, 629), it is precisely these "preferred narratives" that we aim to study.

The first author used NVivo to code and analyze the data. In reviewing the data, the importance of gendered interactions became evident, as did the role of gender ideology and couple identity in storytelling. The theme of collaborative couplehood and inconsistencies between naming stories and parents' responses to detailed follow-up questions about the naming process and labor surfaced continuously. Moreover, many interviews were imbued with references to tension, conflict, disappointment, and, in some cases, overt power plays. These emergent themes led to the development of numerous inductive codes, such as naming process expectations, parental gender ideology, gendered labor, controlling the naming process/outcome, breaking the deal, emotion work, and storytelling.

Although our respondents' ideological approaches to naming are best represented on a continuum from traditional to egalitarian, to get a sense of the sample distribution we coded respondents into three couple identity categories—traditional, moderate-collaborative, and collaborative—based on a holistic assessment of respondents' accounts of their baby-naming process, including their view of how the process *should* work, each parent's naming rights, and how they managed disagreements. Of the full sample, 26 were coded as traditional, 24 as moderate-collaborative, and 22 as collaborative. These categories broke down heavily along class lines, with collaboratives being almost exclusively middle/upper-middle class, traditionals overwhelmingly working class, and moderate-collaboratives mostly middle class.

Respondents who strictly embraced traditionalism performed little naming labor, tending to observe naming traditions such as patrilineal and religious naming. Because traditional gender ideology presupposes male prerogative, these respondents did not try to foster equality or collaboration in process or outcome. In contrast, respondents who embraced egalitarianism performed high degrees of naming labor and collaborative couple identity work. They demonstrated egalitarian expectations by

approaching the process with the goal of mutual agreement, allowing each parent veto power, and/or implementing arrangements with presumed equitable odds (e.g., turn-taking or coin tosses). Moderate-collaboratives aspired to egalitarianism but displayed more ambivalence, as manifested in their arrangements of shared naming but with one partner getting priority choices (e.g., rights to first child or the first name) or overt power plays when one parent wanted a different outcome.

In this article, we highlight the 46 respondents who (strongly or moderately) aspired to a collaborative couple identity because it reflects the now-dominant gender ideology of egalitarianism (Daminger 2020; Horowitz and Fetterolf 2020; Scarborough, Sin, and Risman 2019) and spotlights the extensive couple identity work associated with joint couplehood. Because gender ideology functions on a continuum, we henceforth refer to all 46 respondents as egalitarian/collaborative-aspiring. Of these respondents, 10 are Mexican-born, six of whom immigrated as children. Therefore, our egalitarian-aspiring sample is overwhelmingly composed of people born or raised in the United States, in addition to being predominantly middle class.

FINDINGS

In this section, we show how respondents engaged in couple identity work to reflect the egalitarian ideal of collaborative couplehood. We begin by showing how parents cultivated a collaborative couple identity through the telling and retelling of their baby-naming stories. Next, we illustrate various "mechanisms" of couple identity work—women identifying and anticipating men's preferences, absorbing men's tastes, and procuring men's participation, and men's inaction—and how this work provided cover for gender inequities in labor and power that surfaced in the baby-naming process. Finally, we discuss what occurred when the collaborative contract was breached through hijacking, including women and men's ensuing repair strategies. Throughout, we highlight the labor that goes into couple identity work and baby naming: the *mental/cognitive labor* associated with researching potential names, creating a choice set, and ushering the couple through a collaborative process; the *self- and other-focused emotion work*, which included being agreeable and avoiding conflict to ensure the process and name choice felt good to both parents (or, with hijacking, the emotion work needed to repair or sidestep damage to restore the relationship's equilibrium and the collaborative couple

identity); and the *narrative work* of projecting a collaborative and unifying naming story, often through the use of "we."

Names as Public Storytelling: Cultivating Jointness

A key difference between most family labor and baby naming is that the latter is often recounted publicly as parents are asked to tell the story of how they named their child. Numerous respondents mentioned being called upon to tell their story and, consequently, had a narrative at the ready. For example, Alicia[2] shared, "All of the time I get asked where I got the name from." Similarly, Nicolas has a ready-to-go narrative: "Here's the story, blah, blah, blah . . . and that's why we picked that name." In telling this story and using "we" language, Nicolas engages a central component of collaborative couple identity work.

Omar and Adine, in a joint interview, explained how they wanted a name that commemorated their experience in Chichén Itzá, where their child was conceived. They combined Omar's preference for "Itzá" with "Isaiah" (a name Adine liked) to create their child's name: "Itzaíah." According to Omar, Isaiah means "compromise" and this detail has become a central part of their naming story:

> Adine: When somebody asks, it means "compromise," because—
> Omar: Well, because we compromised. So, we just say, "It means compromise."

Despite this public narrative, Omar admitted that Itzaíah does not actually mean "compromise," as it includes Itzá, which means "people of the village." However, this technicality complicates the story the couple wants to tell. Engaging narrative work, they refined the story to be consistent with their collaborative couple identity.

Couple identity work can require substantial creativity when appealing to audiences both internal and external to the couple. To get her husband on board with the name she wanted—Carson—and craft a naming story that was legible to the public, Carla developed a narrative of couple jointness. She explained, "Carson became the top runner because Raul [husband] starts with *R* and mine starts with *C* and he's our *son*." When asked directly about whether the couple symbolism had driven her naming decision, Carla confessed that it was a post-facto consideration: "No. It kind of came to me after and I was like, oh, well that kind of works well in [our] favor." However, she now centralizes the couple symbolism when telling the naming story because, according to Carla, it helps people understand the logic behind (and thus accept) their name choice. Given

the normativity of egalitarianism, collaborative baby-naming stories—like gender-appropriate stories of marriage proposals (Lamont 2020)—may secure public legitimacy and reap peer benefits (see Edwards 2004; Pedulla and Thébaud 2015).

Collaborative Couple Identity Work: Gender Inequality in Naming

Stories of unity and collaboration often belied inequalities in couple identity work, which was disproportionately undertaken by women. Thus, the performance of relationship egalitarianism can obscure gender inequality in mental/cognitive and emotion labor, as well as latent power. Whereas the collaborative *ideal* was often shared within a couple, women generally performed the work required to foster equality (or the appearance of) in process and outcome. In this section, we explore the power-laden mechanisms of couple identity work that surfaced in our data. For women, these included identifying and anticipating men's naming preferences, absorbing men's tastes to create joint tastes, and procuring men's participation. In the face of women's action-oriented strategies, men often performed inaction—a powerful yet clandestine form of power (Daminger 2019; Komter 1989)—reaping the labor and identity benefits of their partner's labor.

Prioritizing the "we," collaborative couples are expected to have shared interests and engage in decision-making that is relatively free of conflict. However, this does not come naturally for many couples. Instead, consensus needs to be cultivated and conflict actively avoided. Almost exclusively, women performed this work. For example, throughout the naming process, Julia engaged in other-focused emotion work, taking care to ensure the process felt good to her husband, Felipe, and prevented conflict by identifying and anticipating his tastes. She explained, "I would never pick something he didn't like." She eventually proposed only names she learned Felipe would approve of and later framed his preferences as her own: "Because [giving an English name] was so important to him, it was important to me." Whereas the creation of a pool of names can be a source of control for women, Julia's power is constrained by her engagement in couple identity work, which led her to prioritize Felipe's preferences. By absorbing his tastes, Julia created a shared goal for the couple. She described their decisions as "joint," yet also revealed the significant effort she expended to create that outcome by drawing Felipe into the process and amplifying his involvement: "I'd be the one that came to him with,

'These are the ones that I like, which one is your favorite?' So, it was . . . a joint decision." Eclipsing her cognitive labor through narrative maneuvers, Julia framed the labor (and power) as shared, using language such as "that's how *we* came up with it."

In a separate interview, Felipe told the process similarly but was seemingly unconcerned with making the labor appear equal or their preferences joint, and thus performed much less couplehood narrative labor:

> I think she was more invested because she was the one doing all the research. All I was doing was saying "yes," "no," and if I said "yes," we would break it down even further. She's all "why would you like it?" and I would say . . . "Well, it's easy to say. I like it with the last name. It flows . . ." She would bring [names] to me, but she already knew—don't get these names too far that way or too far this way [meaning, not too white or too ethnic sounding]. She would bring them to me and then we would just break them down, yes, no, yes no. But after a while it gets boring. [laughs]

Latent power is at work here, expressed both in Julia's attempts to procure Felipe's participation and Felipe's passiveness.

Julia was clear that the name they ended up with was not her preferred name: "I have a brother named Thomas, so I just thought it'd be kind of confusing, but he liked it so much . . . [that I agreed to it]." Largely through inaction, Felipe controlled the naming outcome *and* reaped the symbolic benefits of looking like he was an engaged partner by way of Julia's couple identity work. Shoring up a collaborative couple identity in the face of inequality requires a great deal of effort. When one partner's behavior falls short of egalitarian expectations, the other partner shoulders the burden of trying to align the couple's practices with the collaborative ideal and construct an illusion of shared investment and responsibility, or otherwise forfeit the collaborative couple identity. In our data, it was men's behavior which most often missed the egalitarian mark, while women assuaged the discrepancies between actual practices and ideal performance through emotion, cognitive, and narrative labor.

Women's recall of the details of their partner's naming tastes was striking. This awareness allowed them to anticipate men's naming preferences. For example, Sandra shared that the couple never needed to have a direct conversation about the ethnicity of the name "because he's very much into our Hispanic roots . . . so it was just kind of understood." In another case, Karen immediately recalled that her husband "didn't want any names that were one syllable . . . so we threw those out pretty quickly." Karen not only deferred to her husband's multisyllabic preference but defended it to

her family, who did not like the name they chose: "At the end of the day, his decision, or what we decide together, is what matters the most to me." Karen's discursive switch from "his decision" to "what we decide together" highlights the narrative work involved in cultivating joint couplehood.

Separate interviews with Yesenia and Robert strongly suggest that Yesenia did most of the cognitive labor associated with baby naming, and much of it in service of Robert's tastes. Yesenia recalled,

> I basically just did all the searching. He doesn't enjoy the process. . . . I'd look at the books and ask him questions and he's just like watching me, just like feeding me sources or making me bounce things off of him. So he was very passive, you know?! But he was very honest when he liked or disliked a name or what his reactions were . . . he wasn't involved but one thing he was very good about is telling me whether something was acceptable to him or not . . . and I appreciate that because he helped me translate which way I should go.

Yesenia describes Robert's passivity and antipathy for name searching, a degendering framing that justifies family labor in individualistic terms (Daminger 2020). She tactfully drew him into the process, while being attentive to clues about his tastes. Significantly, Yesenia extends gratitude for Robert's lesser involvement, emotion work which supports the visage of egalitarianism.

Like other women, Yesenia's commitment to collaborative couplehood runs deep: "If I didn't get the feeling [of his agreement], I wouldn't do it, not because I was nice but because it really meant a lot to me." Her dedication to Robert's preferences and their identity as a couple was apparent throughout Yesenia's interview.

> He's been here so many generations [that] he barely speaks Spanish and his attraction to me is that I'm . . . all into the culture . . . so we really gravitate towards each other because of those things . . . and he likes the fact that Esmerelda [daughter's name] sounds very Spanish . . . it ties him . . . closer to his Mexican roots.

Yesenia simultaneously centers Robert's identity and their relationship magnetism in the naming story and name itself. Her labor is performed in service of Robert's ethnicity and their shared ethnicity as a couple, which is consistent with research showing how women disproportionately carry the burden of maintaining ethnicity within the family (e.g., Vasquez 2014;

Vasquez-Tokos 2017). Robert, who struggled to recall many details of the process, similarly amplified his role through narrative work. He used "we" language to describe the naming labor (e.g., "we were looking for names" and "we focused on the favorites"), making himself appear as an equal partner and elevating the couple unit.

Women also engaged in couple identity work to create and project joint tastes by adopting and framing men's tastes as their own (see Vasquez-Tokos 2017). For example, Melissa used "we" language when narrating the baby-naming story: "We just felt like [the name] would come to us and would feel right." However, when asked for more details, fissures in Melissa's "we" narrative surfaced; the name of their firstborn son came to *her husband* and *he* felt it was right. Melissa explained that her husband witnessed the birth and "felt like he was an angel," watching from above, while she just remembers being "in a lot of pain." Melissa's husband wanted to name their son Angel to commemorate his experience of the birth, but she had reservations: "I felt like Angel was a very common name . . . I wanted something different." Nevertheless, she worked to become amenable: "What helped is that my grandfather's name was also Angel . . . so, that . . . made me feel like, 'okay.' . . . [my husband] felt very strongly about it . . . when I thought about it too, I go, 'You know what? That does feel right,' so we just went with Angel." Melissa endeavored to endow the name with symbolic meaning for herself and the couple. She convinced herself the name was right *for her too*, thus making it right *for them*. This kind of emotion work represents "deep acting" or "deceiving oneself as much as deceiving others" (Hochschild 2003, 33). Revealing a gendered contrast in couple identity work, Melissa's husband displayed a strategy of inaction, expending no effort to ensure the name represented Melissa or her experience, which is consistent with research showing that men feel less responsible than women for conducting emotion work for their partners (Erickson 2005).

In the rare instances in which women did not embrace or absorb men's tastes, instead of developing comparable strategies, men expressed frustration. For example, Gabriel wanted his wife not only to accept his choice of a name but also to share his tastes. He complained, "She didn't really accept it as a name that she wanted, but accepted it as a name that was my turn to give." For him, this was unsatisfactory. He lamented, "I wish that my wife had the same mindset I did." Although Gabriel achieved what he wanted in terms of naming *outcome*, his collaborative expectations about the naming *process* were unmet. Instead of doing the emotion work necessary to make himself feel good about the process, Gabriel practiced the

gendered strategy of inaction, hoping his wife would perform couple identity work for him.

By both men and women's detailed accounts of the baby-naming process, men were generally less involved in baby naming despite egalitarian expectations. Women deeply wanted their partners to be equal participants because they believed the baby-naming process should be done *together* and the outcome represent *accord*. Consequently, they assumed the cognitive, emotion, and narrative labor of catering to or absorbing men's tastes, encouraging and facilitating joint participation, moving the couple toward consensus, and developing a story that emphasized collaboration. Men, in turn, largely practiced inaction, aside from using "we" as a narrative strategy. Notably, women's orchestration of the process often did not lead to greater control over the name. It is likely that men's lower investment in a collaborative couple identity and strategy of inaction worked in their favor by making women more willing to go along with men's preferences to secure their involvement.

Stories of "easy" collaboration both oversimplify and mystify the process through which couples arrive at naming (and presumably other) decisions. Similar to marriage proposal stories, naming stories omitted much of the "behind-the-scenes" work involved in coordinating a major relationship milestone that conforms to gendered social conventions (see Lamont 2020). Because this work is disproportionately performed by women, these stories mask gender inequities. In this way, collaborative couple identity work illustrates "pseudo-mutuality"—a quality of "contemporary patriarchy [that] is about the *subordination of women within the framework of equality*"—and involves "creative energy [that] is deployed in disguising inequality, not in undermining it" (Bittman and Lovejoy 1993, 319–20, emphasis added). However, when manifest power expresses itself in overt power grabs, inequality is not so easily concealed.

When the Collaborative Contract Is Breached: Hijacking and Couple Identity Repair Work

Despite aspiring to egalitarianism, many men had difficulties practicing it, especially when the collaborative process did not achieve their desired outcome. In these instances, men would sometimes violate the collaborative contract, usurping the naming decision in a display of manifest power. We refer to this as "hijacking": men giving women the impression (and likely believing it themselves) that decision-making

would be shared, and then unilaterally rescinding or countermanding women's power, usually at the last minute. Instances of hijacking contained similar elements: Fathers changed the names in the hospital while mothers were recovering from birth, with a justification (e.g., "I liked it" or "I wanted to") that suggested an underlying belief that it was their right to do so. Hijacking demonstrates how men (perhaps ambivalently) wield patriarchal control with the confidence that it will not deeply compromise their relationship. At the same time, hijacking so clearly breaches the collaborative contract that some men felt compelled to engage in relationship repair strategies. They attempted to compensate for their overt displays of patriarchy as these expressions of manifest power are inconsistent with how they see themselves and how they want to be seen.

Men seemed conflicted about their hijacking behavior, as evidenced by the timing of the act, as well as their roundabout storytelling, which sometimes included joking and even laughter. Because collaborative couples operate under an assumption of shared power, when hijacking occurred it took women by surprise and often led to anger, resentment, or resignation. Therefore, men and women's couple identity work centered on repair strategies—men bestowed naming rights for future children, and women practiced emotion work, specifically willful non-intervention to avoid conflict.

Following hijacking, collaborative-aspiring men engaged in couple identity repair work to smooth over their displays of male power. However, this did not translate into unfettered naming rights for women. Men's "gifts" often came with caveats or had men's influence embedded within, and thus became a symbolic move to make the relationship appear egalitarian as opposed to a true elevation of women's control. This was clear in the case of Esteban, who hijacked the naming decision in the hospital. During a joint interview, Esteban explained that they went to the hospital with an agreed-upon name, but he registered their baby under a different name while Sandra was in the bathroom after having just given birth. As the father, Esteban seemed to believe his desires counted more: "I don't know, I just . . . thought it would be . . . I wanted it." He didn't have a formulated rationale for the last-minute switch: "I don't know, when he was born, I just totally changed it. [laughs]" Although Esteban's laughter may seem out of place, laughter may signal collaborative-aspiring men's discomfort with unilaterally superimposing their will and may be an attempt to soften inequalities (Sue and Golash-Boza 2013). Endeavoring to repair the relationship and their collaborative couple identity, Esteban ceded some control in the naming of their second child: "I thought I'd let her decide a little more on the second one." Still,

Esteban's words reveal a continued assumption that he holds the naming prerogative.

Lucero and Mercedes jointly narrated the naming of their four children, including the covert hijacking of their second child's name, overt hijacking of their third child's name, and Lucero's repair work around their fourth child's name. For their first child, Lucero assumed naming rights and chose the name, with Mercedes' approval. For their second child, Mercedes wanted Angélica, but Lucero preferred Angie, illustrating their divergent preferences for a Spanish versus an English name. Lucero said, "'Ok. You want it, you keep it.' . . . everything was the way I wanted [for the first child] so for the second one, it had to be the way she wanted it." But post-birth, Lucero started calling her Angie. Following this subtle hijack, Lucero overtly hijacked the third child's name. Mercedes had chosen a name, to which Lucero agreed, and they filled out the birth certificate accordingly. However, after they left the hospital, Lucero officially changed the name to one he alone preferred because he "liked the way it sounded."

Mercedes and Lucero had a final child, and it was in this context that Lucero engaged in couple identity repair work, granting Mercedes the naming prerogative to mitigate the prior hijacking incidents. During the pregnancy, the couple had talked about various names and Lucero suggested Lucero Matthew, Jr. However, Mercedes had not announced her decision until the day of the birth. They narrated,

> Mercedes: He liked Matthew. So when he came to the hospital, I already had the name . . . He goes, "So how did you name my son after all?" [I replied] "His name is Lucero Matthew, Jr."
>
> Lucero: That was her choice.
>
> Interviewer: And did you like the name?
>
> Lucero: Yeah. I finally had my son. I mean, after three times we tried, nothing but girls, and that was going to be the last one, regardless of what it was. And then it happened to be a boy . . . I wanted it to carry my name. I agreed to it.

Although Lucero could have directly imposed his will regarding the name, likely because of the prior hijackings and his aspiration toward egalitarianism, he made a gesture of deference to his wife, while also conveying his wishes to her. The scenario worked out well for Lucero. He received the name he wanted without appearing authoritarian. This arrangement—women offering a name they already know men want, and men "agreeing" or accepting the offer—surfaced in other interviews. This dynamic allows the couple to distance itself from an image of strict patriarchy and display a façade of collaboration.

In the aftermath of hijacking, women were left to deal with the negative ramifications and often did not confront their partners. Our interviews frequently revealed women's overt or covert expressions of anger and resentment regarding men's hijacking because their collaborative couple identity led them to believe their partners would not behave in overtly patriarchal ways. In cases in which couples want to remain a couple and gender inequality cannot be resolved, emotion work is one of the few recourses available to women (Wong 2017). In our data, women performed couple identity work by practicing a strategy of inaction to avoid further conflict.

Sandra, the wife of Esteban, practiced non-intervention when learning about Esteban's violation of their agreement. Instead of overriding the changed name, she let the new name stand, justifying her behavior by saying she did not want to bother the hospital staff: "Poor lady, I didn't want her to go through all that process. She came up with the paperwork and all I had to do was sign." This rationale rings hollow given what was at stake and that the name was not yet official. Instead, Sandra may have not felt entitled to resist Esteban's patriarchal claim to name the baby or may have been avoiding a situation of deeper inequality, emotion work, and relationship scarring if she had confronted him and lost the naming battle.

Hijacking and subsequent non-intervention also surfaced in Isabel's interview. She explained that the couple went to the hospital with an agreed-upon first name. Isabel then narrated her postpartum experience:

> I had a cesarean. I was highly drugged, okay [laughs]. I didn't recover very well from all the drugs . . . they came with the paperwork . . . my husband decided that [their agreed-upon name] wasn't a good name after all [laughs].

Similar to men's laughter, Isabel's laughter likely signals her discomfort with the inconsistency between an obvious assertion of male dominance and her identity as being in a collaborative partnership. Isabel characterized the moment when she learned about the name switch: "I woke up and her name was Erlinda Isabel. The last thing I wanted to do was name my child after myself!"

Isabel expressed clear distaste for the "new" name and was unambiguous about the fact that an agreement was broken. However, she chose not to confront her husband. Instead, Isabel engaged in narrative work, reframing the decision as collaborative post-facto: "he knew I liked Belinda, so I think he tried to appease both of us by naming her Erlinda . . . it's still 'linda.' That I like." Similar to Christina Ricci, Isabel legitimized

the new name, and framed it as even *better* than the agreed-upon name, describing Belinda as "kind of harsh at the beginning" and Erlinda as "a little more melodic and it kind of flows nicely with [the last name]." Changing one's desires is a strategy used by women when conditions do not allow them to pursue their own goals (Wong 2017), a modulation that maintains marital harmony through topic avoidance, resignation, or reframing (Daminger 2020; Dema-Moreno 2009; Hochschild 2003). Notably, Isabel avoids discussion of the middle name, thus brushing aside her own distaste for that name, avoiding conflict with her partner, and engaging in self-focused emotion work.

Not all collaborative couple identities (or relationships) survive, and the demise is likely influenced by women withdrawing their couple identity work. For example, Rita and her husband engaged in collaborative naming until her husband co-opted her voice to achieve his desired outcome:

> [He] wanted to have me highlight the names that I was interested in. He at the end realized that he liked Alicia, and I said, "I didn't highlight that name!" He said, "Yeah you did!" I'm like "No, I didn't!" . . . And I looked through the list and I had highlighted Elicia with an E, not with an A.

Rita's husband introduced a joint process but did not honor a collaborative outcome. Unlike other women in our sample, Rita was not interested in pursuing repair strategies or cultivating a story that emphasized jointness. Instead, she expressed disillusionment and became less inclined to view their partnership as collaborative:

> I wanted to compromise . . . and go on in our relationship. I realized he's not the compromising type . . . so I . . . stopped with all this giving into him. Just like he made his own decision, I'm going to start making my own decisions.

Rita's sense of unfulfilled promises led her to perceive her relationship in more negative terms and dampened her aspirations toward collaborative couplehood. At the same time, her withdrawal somewhat ironically keeps the relationship viable through the lessening of expectations.

CONCLUSION

The baby-naming *process* and baby-naming *stories* are important avenues for creating and sustaining a collaborative couple identity—and they

are also sites for the reproduction and concealment of gender inequality. The concept of *couple identity work* provides an important addition to the literatures on gender and the family by centering the couple unit and exposing the unequal gendered labor, power, and strategies involved in presenting a couple identity rooted in egalitarian ideology. This study brings a sociological perspective to "we-ness" by showing how being part of a collaborative couple or a "we" can both produce and obscure inequality, with women bearing the brunt of couple identity work as they seek collaboration in practice and appearance. Given that social life is storied, couple identity work highlights the importance of multidirectional storytelling to create, perform, and solidify a couple's identity.

Our findings expose the fragility of purportedly egalitarian relationships, and their continued unequalness, even in the context of baby naming, which is largely shielded from economic shifts (Hochschild 2003; Rao 2017; Wingfield 2021; Wong 2021). In stories of both couple harmony and conflict, we found that regimes of gender inequality infiltrated egalitarian–aspiring relationships. An important intervention to the classic understanding of "we-ness" as unilaterally beneficial and generating satisfaction, we illustrated how the deployment of "we-ness" strategies and stories can paper over individuals' *dissatisfaction within* a relationship, for the benefit of the couple's identity. We further showed how latent and manifest power was expressed through the multiple mechanisms (i.e., strategies) of couple identity work. Men varied in their level of involvement; when they were less involved, women compensated by performing cognitive, emotion, and narrative labor *on behalf of the couple*. Women were proactive, working to identify, accommodate, and represent men's naming tastes, and entreat them to participate in the baby-naming process. They were often innovative and nimble in managing gaps between ideology and practices. Such women's strategies improved the couple's ability to craft a story of collaboration that both parents cosigned, felt good about, and could be told and retold to project an image of egalitarianism. All the while, largely through inaction, men garnered influence and the identity benefits of women's labor.

Men curbing or hijacking women's power tests the limits of storytelling as a strategy to explain away inequality. Situations of hijacking represent the rare context in which men proactively engaged in couple identity repair work because hijacking represents an overt form of male dominance that is inconsistent with a collaborative couple identity. Men's ambivalence may reflect the recent divergence in gender attitudes across public and private spheres, with egalitarianism garnering more support in

the former (Cotter, Hermsen, and Vanneman 2011; Scarborough, Sin, and Risman 2019). As a concession, men granted future (though often contingent) naming rights to their partners, while women either became disgruntled and continued ambivalently in their relationship (Vasquez-Tokos 2017) or performed the emotion work necessary to sustain a collaborative couple identity in the face of a blatantly patriarchal act.

Given the co-constitutive nature of social categories, the gendered dynamics around naming that we identified may intertwine with race/ethnicity and class in important ways. For this reason, we do not claim generalizability. Given middle-class norms of intensive parenting (Hays 1996), coupled with research on middle-class Mexican-American parents that shows they care deeply about the ethnic and class connotations of names (Sue 2023), it is possible that parental investment among our respondents was particularly high, contouring dynamics of gendered power and inequality. On the flip side, patrilineal surnaming is disproportionately practiced by white heterosexuals in the United States (Hoffnung 2006).[3] Therefore, the stakes surrounding first name decisions for white mothers could be higher, and gender inequalities exacerbated, even beyond what we identified among our Mexican-origin respondents. Finally, whereas race/ethnicity was highly relevant for some respondents regarding naming *outcomes*, the role of parental race/ethnicity in couple identity work was not clearly apparent in our data. Only with future research will we better understand what may be general and what may be specific to the dynamics identified among our sample. Moreover, future research should also examine parental negotiations and couple identity work vis-à-vis children's surnames to gain a comprehensive understanding of gender dynamics in naming. Ultimately, the naming process and naming stories reflect individuals' complex navigation of societal expectations regarding gender and couplehood.

Gender attitudes may be trending toward egalitarianism (Scarborough, Sin, and Risman 2019), yet these gender and family arrangements continue to be governed by social norms and beget social and institutional consequences (Edwards 2004; Lamont 2020; Pedulla and Thébaud 2016; Villicana, Garcia, and Biernat 2017). Gendered expectations exert pressure toward private and public expressions of not just men and women's identities, but also *couples'* identities. Women bear the brunt of these pressures, taking responsibility for fashioning gender-appropriate identities not only for themselves, but also for their partners and their relationships.

Couple identity work serves as a cover for societal pressures turned inward. Couples are left to absorb, navigate, and assuage friction resulting

from moves toward egalitarianism in a continuing yet evolving context of patriarchy. Given the intensification of competing gendered expectations, women may increasingly face constrained choices, making concessions to power to achieve a public performance of couple collaboration and, privately, to maintain relationship harmony. In a global context of normative egalitarianism (Horowitz and Fetterolf 2020) and companionate couplehood (Coontz 2006), the absence of discernible egalitarianism can constitute a moral failing, and additional forms of labor, such as couple identity work, may become increasingly imperative, particularly for women.

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NOTES

1. See The Ellen Show (2022). Christina Ricci's husband decided on their newborn's full name without asking her first. YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kN5u_dJqDuY.

2. Names, including most baby names, are pseudonyms.

3. This trend is consistent with our data: Seventy-six percent of egalitarian-aspiring respondents in our sample passed on the father's surname only, compared with 97 percent in a sample of 600 employees of a Midwestern university (Johnson and Scheuble 2002). Part of this discrepancy could be attributable to the social convention among Latin Americans of giving children two last names—one from each parent—spilling over into the naming practices of U.S. immigrants and their immediate descendants.

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