

I've been pondering what a chameleon I am – or rather at least I feel like because of the variety of names and titles I assume or use. I presume that many other female academics may experience the same kinds of feelings of character change when donning their academic names, title and role as opposed to their family and home-based ones.

I rather assume that the problem is nothing like as great for men who only have the title and possibly a more formal first name (or, perhaps perversely, like my husband, a more informal first name) to do when entering the academic workplace.

I do happen to know, from some research that a postgraduate student of mine is conducting, that many mature mother-students experience feelings of both separation and connection between their studies at college and their home lives. This leaves many of them with several dilemmas to resolve about the balance between home and school or college.

In the past I, too, have tried to resolve this dilemma by separating home and work, symbolically at least through the use of my nickname, married name and occasionally title for my maternal responsibilities and my academic title, formal name and maiden name for work. Mostly this has worked tolerably well, and on occasion intolerably.

The nickname bit got rather confused after a long stay in the United States where formality in academe is scoffed at and it also became a part of my work identity. It remained as part of my work identity when my work and family lives became very entwined; and I felt less of a chameleon and slightly more one whole person despite the lack of distancing of work and family.

Recently, my family-in-law used my formal first name and married surname on my behalf, in favour of a cause about which I was somewhat ambivalent. I felt rather relieved to be able to be incognito in work terms, so to speak.

However, this relief was relatively short-lived when I was forced to realize the long-term implications of my ambivalence or indecisiveness about names and titles. I needed to renew my passport. The one I had made 10 years ago was made out in my married name but with the title of

# Married, single or Msconstrued?

doctor. The reason for using my married name, I had rationalized, was because my two children were also included on the passport.

To change all of this now involves an immense and time-consuming palaver. If one wishes to change back to one's maiden name or just add a maiden name before a married name, one needs one's birth certificate and two signed photographs confirming one's identity by a "respectable" citizen.

I presume one needs equally weighty documentation to change one's title. Given that I also had to get all this proof to remove the children from my passport and to get them their own new passports and I had already queued twice for over two hours at the passport office just to learn all of this, I decided not to bother. It all felt like too much just for a passport.

But now I'm left wondering how I'll feel on my next "academic" rather than family trip, with both an out-of-date title and a surname I only use with my family. And how will I feel in 10 years' time when I'm sure that my children will rarely want to travel with me, but I might want to go to lots of international conferences and meetings abroad.

I now realize just how often it is easier to take the line of least resistance with bureaucracies and yet how quickly one learns to regret it. Writing this had made me realize how foolish I was barely two weeks ago to

feel so pressured by time; and yet the inefficiencies of British bureaucracy contributed a great deal to that decision, not only by their criteria and queuing system but also by the warning that it could take up to three months to get a new passport in the busy season. I'd already missed an important meeting and was late in writing an article for an American edited collection so I felt reluctant to devote more time and energy to such an apparently insignificant issue. But is it?

I doubt that many men can begin to comprehend the problem because they have not experienced the feelings of frustration that changes of title and name occasion. It is, however, not an insignificant problem for many women, whether academic or not. First, the obligation to change a surname and at the same time the title from Miss to Mrs is not without its problems (although of course many would argue that there are pleasures too).

I recently read a marvellous post-graduate dissertation in women's studies on the many problems that these issues raise. It was entitled, cleverly, "Msconstrued" and dealt with the short-shrift afforded those women who wish not to have, constantly and often irrelevantly, to reveal their family or marital status. The author had beautifully satirized the debates in *The Times* over these issues over a 10-year period. I hope that one day the dissertation will be



**MIRIAM  
DAVID**

published so that others may enjoy being able to explore the complexities of the feelings about these issues.

In most other countries in the West either Ms or some other title which avoids adult women having to state their marital status is now acceptable or even the norm. I embarrassed myself in Holland a few years ago when I was about to give a major public lecture on women's studies. I was introduced as Mrs David and I immediately said that that was not my name but that of my mother. I was subsequently told that all adult women in Holland are now called Mrs whether married or not.

I have felt for a long time that an academic title, such as a doctorate, is immensely helpful if a general term is not acceptable for covering up one's private family matters. Before getting my PhD I'd thought that people who called themselves doctor having obtained a PhD were rather status-conscious.

I soon realized how pointlessly judgmental I'd been. It was wonderful to be able to call oneself doctor and not to have to say whether or not you were married. It was also wonderful if the term were further misconstrued and people thought you were a medical doctor. And that continues to be the case: the passport official presumed that both I and my husband were medics and asked pleasantly if we'd met in hospital.

Being taken for a medical doctor is

breaks down (hospital). The NHS promise to be there really quickly and on the occasions I've had to call them usually do manage it with some notable lapses. On the other hand, explaining what a doctor of philosophy is to some inquisitive souls can be quite difficult – but I still feel that it's worth it, compared to Miss or Mrs.

I have not yet found that the title of professor is of such universal salience as doctor – although I have noticed how the term doctor *qua* medical doctor has been losing some of its *caché* since the Government's assaults on the NHS and the medical profession.

The problem with the term professor is that it conveys a rather more sober, "grey" message and one that is invariably masculine. As a friend of mine's daughter put it succinctly when her mother became a professor: "But mummy, girls can't be professors!" I've had my fair share of sexist comment. For example, when I arrived late one evening at a residential conference in the autumn, the porter greeted me with the comment that he'd never had a "blonde, pretty lady as a professor before".

The variety and mixture of nicknames, names and titles that I can don only serves to leave me feeling rather confused. I've just worked out that with five possible titles – Miss, Mrs, Ms, Dr or professor – and my nickname or formal name and my maiden or married surname there are 20 different combinations that I could use and each one conveys a slightly different sense; more or less indicative of particular family or work contexts.

For most academic men, there are probably only four or six combinations and on the whole men are allowed, even encouraged, to use their academic titles in the family context. No need for role change here. I've just finished reviewing a book on feminist mothers which looks at the possibilities that women have for creating changes for their children and for their own work and family identities in a patriarchal and racist society.

It shows how well women cope and how strong they are despite the constraints under which they have to operate. The one thing that isn't mentioned is the problem of names. But, then, what's in a name?