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Response To The Role and Determinants of Bride-Price: The Case of a Palestinian Village

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The Role and Determinants of Bride-Price: The Case of a Palestinian Village [and Comments and Reply]

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part of it, is retained at the time of a divorce, this does not become the wife's property, but remains with her male kin. Can there here be a confusion between bridewealth and dowry? British anthropologists make a clear distinction, though Papps says nobody does. The fathers of educated girls do indeed ask a higher bridewealth, but not because education makes them better farm workers. These girls marry salary earners in the towns and expect to "live like ladies."

by FREDERIC L. PRYOR

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The notion that certain aspects of marriage arrangements can be explored in a fruitful manner with the tools of economic analysis is not a novel insight; several empirical studies (unfortunately not cited by the author) have isolated important supply-and-demand factors underlying the bride-price. I do not believe that Papps's study has added much to this literature.

As the author notes, the model does not tell us whether the bride-price is positively or negatively related to fertility until we know something about (a) relative elasticities of the supply and demand curves and (b) shifts of these curves occasioned by the promise of fertility: (a) The nature of marriage in many precapitalist societies suggests that the supply curve is often almost vertical. The author's assertion (without empirical evidence) that the supply curve is more elastic than the demand curve is based on a theoretical consideration that is only one of many factors underlying such elasticities. (b) We are given no empirical evidence to tell us whether it is reasonable to assume that children are a public good such that the utility from them is the same for the husband and wife. Since the maternal mortality in such societies is so high, the woman risks her life with the birth of each child; thus her discounted utility of enjoyment of children might be much less than that of her husband. In such a case the supply curve shift accompanying greater fertility might be less than the demand curve shift, so that the correlation between potential fertility and the bride-price might be positive, not negative.

The other propositions (that "nice" husbands pay less, that virgins fetch a higher bride-price than widows, and that intra-clan marriages result in lower bride-prices than extra-clan marriages) are trivial applications of supply-and-demand analysis that require no fancy diagrams or math to prove.

Since the author tells us nothing about the correlations between the fertility variable and other variables that could influence the bride-price, we do not know if the reported correlations could have any causal significance. The lack of tests against alternative models of the bride-price also reduces our confidence in the results. One unexplained technical puzzle raises further doubts: since ordinary least-square methods are calculated to achieve the "best fit," it is unclear why we find much higher coefficients of determination for the two equations where the regression line is forced through the origin.

by STEPHEN P. REYNA and NANCY E. GRATTON

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Papps, following Becker (1981), applies neoclassical economics to the understanding of the family. She extends the tradition's scope by analyzing bride-price, arguing that it is "the discounted value of part or all of the wife's share of marital output" and as such is controlled by market forces. She claims that an ordinary least-squares regression analysis performed on a sample of bride-prices collected by Granqvist (1931) supports her position. We offer the following observations:

1. Granqvist's data come from a region in which the market as a price-fixing institution has existed for a long time. How-

ever, most societies in which bride-price was or is paid lack such markets. Papps's evidence, thus, probably comes from an atypical case.

2. The regression analysis is based upon extremely small samples (16 and 17 cases) and employs complex equations. (One, for example, uses six variables.) In such samples there is considerable probability that random values of one or two variables will "control" the model. Therefore it is not surprising that many of the variables do not have significant results. Further, those which do may be explained by recourse to entirely different models than Papps's. For example, the consistently significant positive results for the relationship between bride-price and husband and wife kinship may be as well explained by customary preferences as by market forces. Papps terms her regression analysis results "encouraging." We concur, if it is understood by this that the results neither strongly support nor challenge her position.

3. People paying bride-price conceive of and measure value in very different ways than in the West. Yet Papps announces that $BP_i = P_i - C_i$, where BP_i is brideprice, C_i is the value of the bride's consumption of marriage output including public and private goods, and P_i is the total present value of public and private goods accruing to the bride over time. Private goods are such things as food and clothing, and public goods seem, in the main, to be the children produced by the marriage. The equation, if it is to make mathematical sense, requires that a common coin of valuation exist for the very disparate public and private goods. Yet in most societies with bride-price there is no general-purpose money by which a valid common valuation could be established. How, then, is the analyst to compute the value of a private good, food, and add it to a public one, a child, when measuring C_i and P_i ? Papps does not seem aware that such validity problems exist. They are, however, very real: equations based upon measurements of different economic values, where value is not validly measured, are absurd.

4. Observations 1, 2, and 3 suggest that there is weak support for Papps's position and, further, that there is little guidance as to how to perform those analyses which might validly provide support.

5. Many anthropologists believe that bride-prices in market-less societies are simply not prices. Radcliffe-Brown (1971:124), for example, characterized such payments as "prestations," by which he meant money or service "due by law or custom." Goody and Tambiah (1973) pointedly speak only of bride-wealth and never bride-price. Meillassoux (1981:64) says that bridewealth goods have "conventional" value. The crux of the issue is that many anthropologists believe that custom, law, or political action set marriage payments at levels other than those which would be imposed by market forces. However, studies conforming to the norms of contemporary empirical data analysis that support this position are lacking.

6. Many anthropologists have insisted that a major function of bride-price is to create and reproduce alliances between groups (Radcliffe-Brown 1971:129; Meillassoux 1981:61). Alliances do not produce outputs which over time acquire discounted values, though they may foster production activities which have such consequences. Consequently, there is little likelihood that the value of alliance equals the discounted value of the wife's share of the marriage output.

7. The preceding suggests an alternative view: that in marketless societies bride-price, like the bride, *arbitrarily symbolizes* alliance and resembles gift exchange between heads of state. The United States gives China a chair embossed with an eagle, the Chinese reciprocate with a panda; a Toupouri in Chad gives 11 cattle and conventionally receives a wife. Chair, panda, cattle, and wife are arbitrary symbols of relationship.

8. Many prices observed in the contemporary world are not