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."

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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 Papp'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 presence of potential private goods. (a) The nature of demand 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 intraclan marriages result in lower bride-prices than extraclan 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 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 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 against alternative models of the bride-price also reduces our confidence in the results.

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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-