

Comment on:

# " The Role and Determinants of Bride-Price: The Case of a Palestinian Village<sup>1</sup>

by Ivy Papps

by Amyra Goossband - Stechtman

SUBSTANTIAL TRANSFERS OF RESOURCES between individuals or families take place on marriage in many cultures. Even in Western societies where such a transfer is not formally required or acknowledged, one frequently observes large wedding gifts in cash or kind. In many other societies, these transfers appear to form an intrinsic part of the marriage contract. Anthropologists have always been interested in such marriage payments and have produced many interesting hypotheses about them, but there appears to be no real consensus about their role.

In recent years, economists have become interested in household behaviour (see Becker 1973 and, for a nontechnical survey of the literature, Papps 1980). They argue that the decision to form a new household by marriage is as important as the decision to form a new firm and may be analysed in terms of a similar body of theory. This implies that applying economic theory to marriage payments may yield some fruitful insights. This paper is an attempt to illustrate the potential contribution of economic analysis through an examination of bride-price (sometimes also called bridewealth or dowry). I shall first examine various types of marriage payments and discuss briefly some of the interpretations placed upon them

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by anthropologists. Then I shall discuss these payments in the light of economic theory and apply the theory to the payment of bride-price in a Palestinian village.

## TYPES OF MARRIAGE PAYMENTS AND THEIR FUNCTIONS

There is a curious lack of consistency in the anthropological literature with respect to the vocabulary of marriage payments. The most useful and clearly defined classification I have found is that of Spiro (1975), and I shall therefore use it throughout this paper. Spiro distinguishes four kinds of marriage payment: (a) bride-price (which he calls bridewealth)—payment from the groom or his family to the bride or her family; (b) groom-price (which he calls groomwealth)—payment from the bride or, usually, her family to the groom or his family; (c) dowry—payment from the bride's family to the newly married couple; and (d) dower—payment from the groom's family to the newly married couple. Bride-price and dowry are the more common institutions and, since they appear to be connected with the giving or receiving of a bride, have become connected in the popular mind with the subjection of women. Although there may be some connection, I shall argue that the relationship is much more complex than the simple buying and selling of wives.

At first sight, one might view bride-price and dowry as essentially the same sort of payment, with bride-price reflecting a positive value for women and dowry a negative one. (That is, one would expect dowries to be paid where women imposed a net cost on the household.) However, bride-price and dowry are often paid on the same marriage, and Goody (in Goody and Tambiah 1973:6) observes that "bridewealth and dowry . . . are very far from being mirror opposites." Goody, along with many other anthropologists, sees dowry as an antemortem inheritance—the bride's share of her own family's assets. This interpretation appears to me to be essentially correct. It is supported by the observation that in almost all cases in which dowry is paid, it is the property of the wife—although it may be used in common in the new household—and when the marriage ends reverts to the original family. Thus, on divorce the wife will leave the marital household taking the dowry with her, and if she dies while still married the dowry is inherited by her children or by her own family rather than by her husband. Further support for this interpretation is the practice, observed by many anthropologists, of excluding married daughters who have received a dowry from a share in their dead father's estate. By contrast, the bride-

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I congratulate both the author of this paper and the editor, the former for the originality and courage to address an issue rejected by mainstream economics and the latter for opening these pages to much-needed interdisciplinary communication. In her introduction Papps discusses the lack of consensus among anthropologists studying bride-prices. Consensus among economists, while not complete, exists around a general acceptance of market theories, but there may be some disagreement regarding the determinants of markets.

I share with Papps a reliance on the concept of markets for wives (see, for instance, Grossbard 1976). However, my market for wife labor (see also Grossbard-Shechtman 1982) differs from that developed by Becker (1973) and Papps. As a result, some of my predictions regarding determinants of bride-price contradict those presented here. Instead of a supply of wives I have a supply of hours of wife labor, upward-sloping because of the increasing unpleasantness of spending more and more time in the production of children and other goals of marriage. This emphasis on the negative implications of excessive domestic and productive work by women explains some of my divergence from Papps's theory of bride-price, based on Becker's theory of marriage markets.

First, contrarily to Papps, I predict that women's relative dependency on their male kin will affect bride-price levels. A woman and her relatives do not always see eye to eye regarding her marriage, especially not where it regards the work she has to put into it. Although this may be irrelevant for a micro-level study of a small village within a given cultural and legal context, the following hypothesis matters for other applications of a market theory of bride-price. I predict that the more women depend on male kin, the more a bride-price system is likely to be found and the higher the average bride-price level. The reason is twofold: (1) If the male kin controls its daughters' marriages and can receive a bride-price, it is likely to emphasize down payments at the time of marriage on the account of a reduction in future wife compensations. In Papps's language, control over daughters implies a desire to raise *BP* relatively to *P*. (2) In such societies women are controlled by either kin or husbands and their kin, which implies more property rights over women's labor and therefore both higher productivity after marriage (demand shifts upward) and higher opportunity cost to women's marriage (supply shifts to the left). Both shifts lead to a prediction of higher price and bride-price.

Second, contrarily to Papps, I predict that women's fecundity is generally associated with higher levels of bride-price. I agree with Papps that women also receive some enjoyment from their children, who are to some extent a public good to their parents. However, the number of children desired by men and women has to be separated from the capacity for bearing children (fecundity). It is overlooked by Papps that women's alternative to children in marriage is to have children out of wedlock (an alternative not much relied upon in Muslim villages). Women's preference for legitimate children drives their supply of wife labor down, for it increases the utility from working as a wife. But from the perspective of a mother of five, the benefits from having a sixth child are dubious compared to the costs of having to bear and principally rear all these children. If it were possible to differentiate the fecundity of a woman able to bear six children from that of a woman who can only have five children, I do not believe it would much affect her supply of wife labor. To the extent that large families are desirable, however, it would shift the demand for wife labor to the right, implying a higher "price" and bride-price. Since higher levels of fecundity are associated with shifts in demand more than in supply, bride-prices are expected to rise.

How, then, do I interpret Papps's "finding" of a negative

association between a woman's mother's fertility and her bride-price? First, by discounting her findings in general. A sample of 17 marriages and no information on bride's and groom's ages is a bad starting point. Second, by pointing out that the variable which seems to be statistically significant (INDF2) discounts daughters by half, and I do not see why women would put such low values on their own daughters if children are viewed as public goods. Third, by suggesting that the significant finding may be statistically spurious. Families who marry off younger women are likely to receive a higher bride-price, and families with many children need their daughters less and are more likely to marry them off younger.

A final point involves disagreement with Papps only in certain parts of the paper. While she states several times that the groom's characteristics are not likely to affect the bride-price, she argues convincingly at another point that husbands can compensate their wives not only by paying a bride-price, but also by being nice. One could add, also by being from a prestigious background, relatively young, or educated. This implies that a long list of the groom's characteristics—including his family's social status—would have to be controlled for in an empirical study testing a market theory of bride-price.

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Undoubtedly marriage is in more than one sense an investment of resources, but the analogy between contracting a marriage and setting up a firm is new; some of us may have thought that a closer comparison was with a political alliance, such as has often been sealed by a marriage in societies at all levels of technology.

I think I need not apologize for my difficulty in following an argument of a type which my profession does not require me to understand, but I must ask some questions as a layman. Are children part of a "marriage output"? What is the share of this that a wife enjoys? Pleasure in their company? The "cow of rearing" which Africans often give to a wife's mother is generally taken as an indication that rearing as well as bearing is counted among the services rendered by a wife.

Papps's data are taken from Granqvist's 50-year-old study of a Moslem village in Palestine (a remarkable achievement in its day), and she relies on footnote references to very much older sources. Her argument seems to imply something more than a "customary" level of bridewealth payment such as would no doubt be found anywhere—rather, a choice made among a large number of available women, taking account of the contribution expected from each to an undefined "marriage output." The possibility that a girl's guardian may reject the suitor is not considered as a factor in the situation. A much more recent study (Cohen 1965) of a village not far distant, in which the ground rules are still much the same, tells a detailed story of a competition for a girl between two youths which had nothing to do with such considerations but turned on a power struggle between kin groups.

I am no specialist on the Middle East, but what I know of Africa leads me to regard Papps's thesis with some misgiving. Exchange marriage is rare in Africa. The Tiv in Nigeria practised it until it was forbidden by colonial law; it was a prestigious, not a cheap, form. Where there is no restriction on polygyny, girls are betrothed as soon as they are nubile, sometimes long before, so that there is little question of a younger bride's commanding a better "price." Where an unmarried woman is an anomaly, sometimes even a disgrace to her kin, it is not very meaningful to ask whether a woman, if she had remained unmarried, would have been more productive. A widow is normally inherited by one of her husband's kin, so that no new marriage payment is made and there is no question of widows' being "cheaper" than virgins. If bridewealth, or