

# Individual vs. Parental Consent in Marriage: Implications for Intra-household Resource Allocation and Growth\*

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January 23, 2006

## Abstract

Marrying individuals' consent has been requirement for marriage in Europe since the Middle Ages – in most of the rest of the world parental consent reigned until at least until the 1950s. This paper investigates the role of consent in marriage for intra-household allocation of resources and growth. We argue that a shift from parental to individual consent moves resources in the same direction, favoring young men and young women over old men. If young adults have greater incentives to invest in child human capital than the old (who will be around fewer periods), this may impact on growth. We formulate a simple endogenous growth model capturing these aspects.

Keywords: Individual consent, love marriage, parental consent, arranged marriage, endogenous growth.

JEL codes: J12, O17, O40.

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\*A shorter version of this paper to appear in the American Economic Review, Papers and Proceedings 2006.

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“Marriage shall be entered into only with the free and full consent of the intending spouses.”

Article 16, paragraph 2, Universal Declaration of Human Rights, proclaimed and Adopted by the United Nations General Assembly December 10, 1948.

“The parents, not the marrying children, participated in the [marriage] contract...a purchased bride might be sold by the groom’s parents, thus ending the marriage at any time.”

Cheung [1972]:664 on traditional Chinese marriage.

## 1 Introduction

Individual consent was a central plank in the Catholic Church’s marriage doctrine, enforced in Europe since the Middle Ages. Outside the Western World, parents, fathers in particular, decided marriage until at least the 1950s, when many countries adopted Western style family law [Goode 1970]. Individual and parental consent roughly correspond to what is commonly referred to as love and arranged marriage, respectively. This paper argues that a shift from parental to individual consent also redistributes resources: from old to young and from men to women. Such redistribution may have further consequences for growth if, for instance, the young, or women, are more prone to invest in the human capital of children. One reason for why that would be the case is that the young, by definition, have longer to live.

Our argument for why young women and men gain from individual consent is that with consent comes bargaining power. In short, for young women, individual rather than parental consent makes the bride, rather than her father, the recipient of the “bride-price.” Edlund has argued elsewhere, e.g., Edlund and Korn [2002], that men pay for marriage. Under individual consent, the bride owns herself and we posit that this also makes her the recipient of the bride-price. Under parental consent, by contrast, her father owns her, and he is the recipient. The anthropological evidence overwhelmingly point in the direction of bride-price payments being associated with parental consent and going to the father. Explicit bride-price has been absent from individual consent regimes, the reason may be that when the bride is the recipient there is less need for a lump-sum payment, the “bride-price” may be implicit in the

form of higher level of consumption in marriage and widowhood (advantageous in the case of credit constraints). Incidentally, it is commonly accepted that women enjoyed a higher status in Europe than Asia.

A similar argument underlies our contention that young men gain from individual consent. Under parental consent, the old can order the young to marry and thus a father only needs to purchase a daughter-in-law to marry his son. By contrast, under individual consent, the decision to marry lies with the son and hence the father will have to induce the son to marry. The son wants to marry, but also values consumption in old age. Since the latter is determined by his sons' productivity, he will want to not only spend on wives but also on his sons' human capital. Therefore, it will be more expensive for the father to *induce* his son to marry than to simply buy him a wife. Hence, individual consent can result in a society in which more resources are in the hands of the young.

Under either consent regime, we assume that young men are “owned” by their fathers in the sense that the output produced by (young) men belongs to their (old) fathers. The consent regime dictates how much the father transfers back to the son.

We are the first, to our knowledge, to analyze the consequences for intra-family resource allocation of individual and parental consent. The literature linking child human capital investments and growth has assumed that parents decide such investments, e.g., Becker, Murphy, and Tamura [1990]; Ehrlich and Lui [1991]; Cole, Mailath, and Postlewaite [1992]. We note that the marriage regime may impact on who controls resources: parents under individual consent, grand-parents under parental consent – and age may impact on willingness to invest in the future.<sup>1</sup>

The paper proceeds as follows. Section 2 further describes individual and parental consent and their correlates drawing on the anthropological literature. Section 3 models the redistribution from old to young and shows how such a redistribution may raise growth. Section 4 concludes.

## 2 Background

“Just as dogs were raised to hunt for their masters before they were pets, so in early traditional China children were raised as a source of income and a

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<sup>1</sup>In either case, the middle generation supports the elderly, although the consent regime impacts on the level of this support.

store of wealth” (Cheung [1972]:641). As workers, daughters are likely to be less valuable than sons. However, the difference can be made up if daughters are more valuable than sons on the marriage market. Still, parents only capture this value if they are the recipients of the bride-price. In Africa “Bridewealth[price]... goes to the bride’s male kin...a man is...highly dependent upon ‘sisters’ for bringing the wealth and ‘fathers’ for distributing it.... The authority of the older generation is linked to the extent to which the young are dependent on them for marriage cattle or the equivalent” (Goody [1973]:5). This has also largely been true of China and India (e.g., Freedman [1970]; Mandelbaum [1970]).

Generally speaking, daughters not sons were sold. Incest taboo may be a possible reason. A father could use his son as a laborer, but not his daughter as a wife.<sup>2</sup>

It seems reasonable to assume that children as a source of income have been more important among the poor. Among the rich or upwardly mobile, daughters have been given as gifts to curry favors or cement political alliances.<sup>3</sup> Among upper class Indian families, parents choose partners but did not exact a bride-price (instead, they endowed their daughters with dowry).

**Evidence of redistribution** A key assertion in this paper is that individual consent redistributes resources from old to young and/or from men to women. Since individual consent was introduced in Europe in the Middle Ages, what is the evidence that the young were relatively better off, or that women received higher transfers in marriage, in Europe than in Asia or Africa?

Regarding the young-old dimension, in Europe, there was an emphasis on the nuclear, instead of the extended, family which favored young adults. Clearly, young adults did care for their aging parents in Europe as well. However, the position of the old was different: they were dependents and not heads of households [Goody 1983]. In Asia and Africa, a young man was dependent on the older generation to be able to purchase a bride, e.g. for Africa, Goody [1973]; and Coquery-Vidrovitch [1997]; for China, Cheung [1972]; and Wolf [1995]; and for India, Mandelbaum [1970].

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<sup>2</sup>The Lele solved this problem by giving a father the right to marry his daughter’s daughter, Mair [1953]:81.

<sup>3</sup>Osama Bin Laden’s fourth wife was a gift by her father. While Muslim family law makes a bride party to her marriage contract, not a mere object, pre-islamic practises remain in many parts of the Muslim world.

In Europe wives received a lump sum payment from the husband early in marriage, in the form of a morning gift or a dowry. Second, wives probably received higher transfers in marriage. For instance, (i) there was more emphasis on the conjugal bond than the extended family in Europe [Goody 1983], which arguably strengthened the position of the young wife (who did not have to submit to her parents-in-law; the traditional position of the daughter-in-law in China and India is uniformly described as pitiful, e.g., Mandelbaum [1970]; Wolf [1995]); (ii) men could not take additional wives (the case in China, and, to a lesser extent, India);<sup>4</sup> and (iii) *purdah* (the seclusion of women within the household) was never practised in Europe, while this was the case in India and China.<sup>5</sup> Third, widows inherited their husbands' estates. In traditional India, China and Africa this was not the case. Instead, a male relative received the inheritance ([Mair 1953]; Tambiah [1973]; Bernhardt [1999]).

Bride-price is paid to the male kin of the bride and only few examples of the bride side paying the groom side. "Bridewealth and dowry then are very far from being mirror opposites. Indeed, the mirror opposite of bridewealth would be groomwealth; and of bride-service, groom-service. But there is little to be put in these two boxes by way of actual cases...." Goody [1973]:6, for empirical evidence to this effect, see Zhang and Chan [1999], also Table 1. It is interesting to note that bride-price is typically in the form of a lump sum payment. The father-of-the-bride may be more impatient than the bride (or have more difficulty enforcing future payments).

An implication of our theory is that the gender property distribution should be different under individual and parental consent, in particular, women would be excluded from owning property under parental consent since denied the "bride-price." The exclusion of women from property has been particularly pronounced in China and Africa, where dowry or female inheritance has been rare. For instance, among the East African cattle herding peoples where cattle were the principal form of assets and used only for marriage transactions. A father would receive cattle for his daughters and use cattle for brides for himself or his sons [Goody 1973].

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<sup>4</sup>While polygyny raises the demand for women, Becker [1991]:chapter 3, women only benefit if they are also the recipients of the bride-price, noted by Bergstrom [1994].

<sup>5</sup>The General Report of the Indian Census 1931 attributes the excess mortality of adult Muslim women to the practise of *purdah*, suggesting that *purdah* afforded a lower standard of living to women than men.

**Agency and payments** While the person who makes or receives the bride-price is typically the same as the one who consents to marriage, there are exceptions. Africa provides examples of societies where partner choice was left to the individual, but in order for the husband to claim paternity of children borne by his wife he had to pay her father a bride-price [Mair 1953]. The Jewish *Mohar* that originated as a payment to the bride's father but by the time of the Second Temple (536 B.C. to A.D. 70) had become a payment to the bride possibly provides an example of the converse, a parental consent regime without bride-price [Epstein 1973].<sup>6</sup> Table 2 attempts to summarize consent regimes and transfers in pre-industrial societies.

**De jure and de facto** Evidence that individual consent was not only prescribed but also practised in Europe is the virtual absence of child marriages. Arguably, one way to minimize resistance from the prospective spouses is to conclude the marriage contract while the children are young. In both India and China, child or infant marriages were common, whereas in Europe brides (and grooms) were rarely pre-pubescent (for Europe see, e.g., Cipolla [1972]).

### 3 Model

Consider this overlapping-generations model. Agents live in two periods (other than childhood), young and old, and are either male or female. Men pay to marry, and we refer to this payment as the bride-price. This price is paid either to the bride directly (individual consent), or to her father (parental consent).

A young man marries  $z_t$  young women in period  $t$ , at a price of  $p_t$  per wife. (Old do not marry.) Each young woman gives birth to one son and one daughter. Women consume the bride-price received when young (if any), but are otherwise passive.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup>Individual consent was originally deemed important for a marriage to be valid. However, the individual consent requirement was often compromised [Biale 1995].

<sup>7</sup>We could let women consume when old as well (and live off income generated by their children and/or savings). However, such a formulation would not yield additional insights regarding the growth impact of individual or parental consent, and is thus superfluous for our purposes, unless old women's attitudes towards the younger generations are assumed to be different from old men's, a possibility, e.g., Duflo [2000]. Of course, allowing women to benefit wholly or partially from their grown children would reduce the extent to which parental consent is disadvantageous for women (compared to individual consent).

Men and women are homogenous and in equal numbers. Men may marry more than one wife but with balanced sex ratios the bride-price adjusts so that every man buys one wife in equilibrium.

Men care about their own consumption when young,  $c_{1,t}$ , and old,  $c_{2,t+1}$ ; the number of wives they marry,  $z_t$ ; and the number of wives their sons marry,  $z_{t+1}$ . The utility function for a young man in period  $t$  is given by:

$$(1) \quad U_t = (1 - \phi) \{ (1 - \beta) \ln c_{1,t} + \beta \ln c_{2,t+1} + \beta \delta \ln z_t \} + \phi \beta \ln z_{t+1},$$

where  $\beta \in (0, 1)$ ,  $\delta > 0$ , and  $\phi \in [0, \delta/(1 + \delta))$ .

Labor income is generated by young men, but belongs to their fathers. Period  $t + 1$  income is given by  $wh_{t+1}$ , where  $w \geq 1$  is an exogenous wage rate (inequality explained later) and  $h_{t+1}$  is the human capital invested in a son at time  $t$ ; this is subject to the constraint that  $h_{t+1} \geq \underline{h}$ , for some  $\underline{h} > 0$  (ensuring that incomes do not fall to zero under parental consent).

Under parental consent, old fathers pay for the brides of their sons. Under individual consent the young men (the grooms) pay for the brides themselves, so the father has to make a transfer to his son to induce marriage. The son allocates this transfer between the purchasing of wives, own consumption, and human capital investment in sons.

**Individual consent** Consider first individual consent. A young man receives a transfer,  $\tau_t$ , from his father.<sup>8</sup> The male budget constraints are thus

$$(2) \quad c_{1,t} = \tau_t - z_t[p_t + h_{t+1}]$$

when young; and

$$(3) \quad c_{2,t+1} = z_t[wh_{t+1} - \tau_{t+1}]$$

when old, where we note that  $z_t$  also denotes the number of sons (each wife provides one son).

A man who is young in period  $t$  maximizes utility in (1), subject to (2), (3), (7) (explained below), and  $h_{t+1} \geq \underline{h}$ . He chooses the number of wives,  $z_t$ ; human capital investment,  $h_{t+1}$ ; and the future transfer to each son,  $\tau_{t+1}$ . The first-order condition for  $z_t$  implies that

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<sup>8</sup>We have assumed away women's consumption when old, so the young man cannot pay by promising a cut in a future son's earnings or a daughter's bride-price.

$$(4) \quad (1 - \beta) [c_{1,t}]^{-1} (p_t + h_{t+1}) = \beta(1 + \delta) [z_t]^{-1}.$$

As we shall see, under individual consent, given the right assumptions about exogenous parameters and initial conditions,  $h_{t+1} \geq \underline{h}$  never binds. The first-order condition for  $h_{t+1}$  can thus be written

$$(5) \quad (1 - \beta) [c_{1,t}]^{-1} z_t = \beta w [wh_{t+1} - \tau_{t+1}]^{-1}.$$

From (4) and (2) we note that

$$(6) \quad z_t = \left[ \frac{\beta(1 + \delta)}{1 + \beta\delta} \right] \frac{\tau_t}{p_t + h_{t+1}}.$$

Next we need to find the son's optimal  $\tau_{t+1}$ . To that end, we first guess a relationship between  $z_{t+1}$  and  $\tau_{t+1}$ :

$$(7) \quad z_{t+1} = \eta \frac{\tau_{t+1}}{p_{t+1}},$$

for some  $\eta > 0$ . We shall confirm that this functional form also holds in period  $t$ .<sup>9</sup> The first-order condition for  $\tau_{t+1}$  gives

$$(8) \quad \tau_{t+1} = \phi w h_{t+1}.$$

Using (4), (5) and (8) we note that  $h_{t+1} = p_t / [\delta - \phi(1 + \delta)]$ , or:

$$(9) \quad h_{t+1} + p_t = p_t \frac{(1 + \delta)(1 - \phi)}{\delta - \phi(1 + \delta)}.$$

(Recall that  $\delta - \phi(1 + \delta) > 0$ .) Insert (9) into (6) and we obtain

$$(10) \quad z_t = \frac{\beta[\delta - \phi(1 + \delta)]}{(1 + \beta\delta)(1 - \phi)} \frac{\tau_t}{p_t} = \eta \frac{\tau_t}{p_t},$$

which confirms the conjecture in (7).

We can now derive a dynamic equation for human capital investment. Recall that  $h_{t+1} = p_t / [\delta - \phi(1 + \delta)]$ . In equilibrium,  $z_t = 1$ . Hence (10) implies that  $p_t = \eta \tau_t$ , where  $\tau_t$  is given by (8) lagged one period. This gives

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<sup>9</sup>Formally, this is a Markov Perfect Equilibrium of an extensive form game where the strategy of each player (each man) is a function which determines  $z_t$  as a function of  $\tau_t$ .



$$(11) \quad \frac{h_{t+1}}{h_t} = \frac{\beta\phi w}{(1 + \beta\delta)(1 - \phi)}.$$

If the right-hand side of (11) is greater than unity then  $h_{t+1} > h_t$ , i.e., there is sustained growth. If so, assuming that  $h_0 \geq \underline{h}$  ensures that the constraint  $h_{t+1} \geq \underline{h}$  does not bind for any  $t \geq 0$ , since the unconstrained choice of  $h_{t+1}$  always exceeds  $\underline{h}$ .

**Parental consent** Under parental consent the father purchases daughters-in-law and thus has no incentive to transfer resources to the son. Young men lack incomes to invest in their sons; old men set human capital investment in their grand sons to the minimum level  $\underline{h}$ . Income is thus constant at  $w\underline{h}$ , and there is no growth.

In period  $t$ , old men earn what their sons produce,  $z_{t-1}wh_t$ , plus bride-prices from daughters,  $z_{t-1}p_t$  (recall that the  $z_{t-1}$  wives bear one son and one daughter each). They buy each son  $z_t$  wives, at price  $p_t$ , and invest  $\underline{h}$  in each grand son. Old men's consumption thus becomes

$$(12) \quad c_{2,t} = z_{t-1}[wh_t + p_t - z_t(p_t + \underline{h})].$$

In a steady state  $h_t = \underline{h}$ , and at marriage market equilibrium  $z_{t-1} = z_t = 1$ , so old men's consumption in (12) becomes  $(w - 1)\underline{h}$ , which is non-negative if  $w \geq 1$  (as assumed). Young men (and women of both ages) consume nothing under parental consent.<sup>10</sup>

**Individual vs. parental consent** The dynamics of  $h_t$  are illustrated in the 45-degree diagram in Figure 1.

Under parental consent  $h_{t+1} = \underline{h}$  regardless of initial conditions; under individual consent human capital (and thus per-capita incomes) grow at (net) rate  $\beta\phi w / [(1 + \beta\delta)(1 - \phi)] - 1$ .

Sustained growth under individual consent is driven by old men transferring resources to their sons to induce them to buy wives. Since sons also care about the next period's family income, part of the transfer is allocated to quality investment in the next generation, sustaining perpetually rising income levels. Under parental consent, this transfer motive is shut down.

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<sup>10</sup>One could alternatively assume an arbitrarily small lower limit for sons' consumption since the utility function in (1) is not defined for zero consumption.

Thus, in the long run individual consent makes everyone better off. The short-run effects are more ambiguous: holding fixed  $h_t$ , women and young men are better off under individual consent, whereas old men are better off under parental consent.

## 4 Discussion

We have argued that a shift from parental to individual consent also shifts resources in the same direction. This, in turn, may impact on human capital accumulation and growth. The posited mechanism is that under parental consent, the households consumption-investment decision is taken by the third generation, who, unless completely altruistic, will be less forward looking than the second generation (who control more resources under individual consent).

In our model individual consent does not guarantee growth (whether it does depends on parameters; see (11)). There are also many factors from which we abstract which could make parental consent growth enhancing. For example, since it favors old men with many adult daughters, it could raise longevity and population growth. Parental consent could also be important for understanding extended families. If extended families provide more household public goods, e.g. good health, this can counteract a less favorable allocation of private goods, e.g., human capital.

In our model we assume that the father is able to confiscate his son's human-capital income (effectively employ adult sons at subsistence wage). This may be realistic if the father controls some key resource, such as land. Since land is typically passed down from father to son, it begs the question why the adult son does not borrow against his expected inheritance to invest in his children, if such an investment were to yield a higher return than the land given up. Empirically, such transactions have not been common. In fact, even in land-scarce Asia, land markets have traditionally been thin, and most sales caused by financial distress. Although outside the scope of this paper, a potential reason may be that uninsurable risk gives rise to precautionary savings in the form of land, and social norms have arisen to curb disposal of land unless a matter of life and death.<sup>11</sup> The relevance of a model without

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<sup>11</sup>Confer the Chinese concept of ancestral land, and the Indian practise of making all male descendants co-parcenaries.

capital markets or bequests is perhaps not an inconceivable characterization of pre-industrial societies, but ultimately an empirical question.

Finally, our model only examines the growth effects of reallocating resources from fathers to sons. But, individual consent also redistributes from men to women, and there are several ways in which this might be good for growth. Women might have stronger preferences for the quality of children than do men; since individual consent raises the income of women it may thus induce a quantity-quality substitution and thus faster growth. Individual consent could also allow women to retain some control over fertility (against a lower bride-price), and women may use the bride-price to invest in their own human capital which may directly impact children's human capital.

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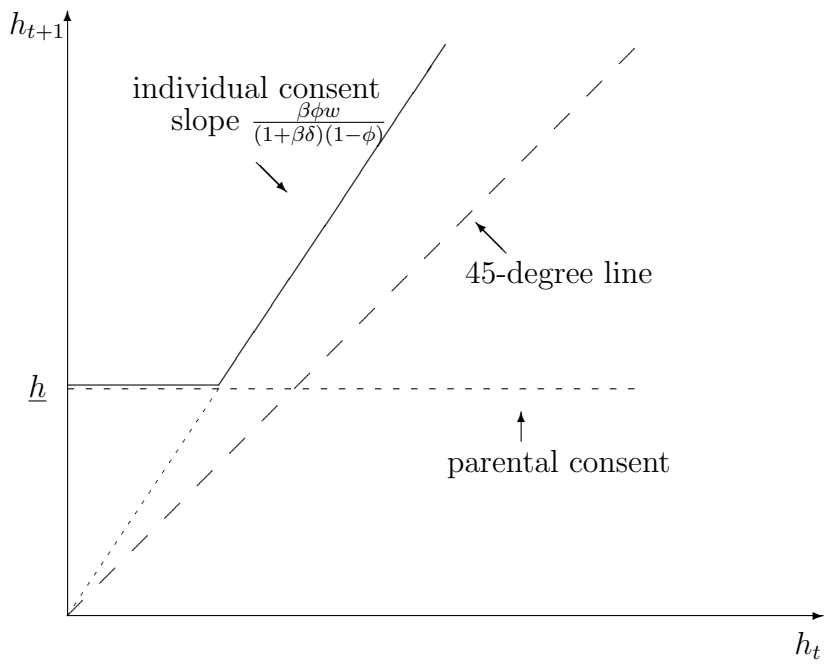


Figure 1: Human capital dynamics under individual and parental consent

Table 1: Forms of marriage payment among pre-industrial societies

<i>N</i>	%	cum. %	Payment
646	51	51	Bride-price to bride's family
123	10	61	Bride service to bride's family
39	3	64	Sister or female relative exchanged for bride
68	5	69	Token bride-price
63	5	74	Gift exchange, reciprocal
276	22	96	Absence of consideration
33	3	99	Dowry to bride from her family
19	1	100	Missing
1267	100		Sum

Source: Murdock's Ethnographic Atlas Codebook, 1998 World Cultures 10(1).

Table 2: Consent and payments in pre-industrial societies

Society	Consent					Dowry	Other	Source
	Individual	Parental	Bride price	Dowry	Other			
Christian	Yes	No	No	Yes (upper)		Goody [1983]		
Jewish	Yes		Yes	Indirect	<i>Mohar</i>	Biale [1995]		
Buddhist	Yes		No			Tambiah [1973]		
Muslim	Yes	Yes	Yes	Indirect		Pearl and Menski [1998]; Kressel [1977]		
India	No	Yes	Yes lower	Yes (upper)		Mandelbaum [1970]		
China	No	Yes	Yes	No	Imperial China	Wolf [1995]; Cheung [1972]		
Africa	No	Yes	Yes	No		Mair [1953]; Goody [1973]		