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Testing Explanatory Models of Dowry: A Reply to Schlegel

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We thank Alice Schlegel for her thoughtful critique of our hypothesis on the function of dowry. We are in agreement with her on many issues. For example, *contra* Dickemann (1991), Schlegel agrees with us (Gaulin and Boster 1990, 1991) that the participation of families in marriage transactions is a logical outcome of their competitive function. Nevertheless, there are subtle but important differences in our positions, and it is these differences that we emphasize here.

In an ambitious article, Schlegel and Eloul (1988) examined the cross-cultural distribution of marriage transactions in terms of labor, status, and property relations; their focus is at least as much on the consequences of marriage transactions as on their causes.

Where productive property is communal rather than private . . . bridewealth serves to circulate goods. It tends to equalize rather than concentrate them. . . . the pow-

erful man does not keep his wealth but distributes it to acquire wives and in-laws. Dowry and indirect dowry are likely to be found where there is substantial private property—land, money, or marketable herds—that ultimately goes to the grandchildren. Indirect dowry funnels property through the son's wife to his children, while dowry passes property to the daughter's children. In either case, property is concentrated rather than dispersed. [Schlegel and Eloul 1988:294]

Perhaps this concern with consequences (cf. Goody 1973) is why Schlegel begins her critique with an imprecise summary of our argument. We do not claim that dowry *leads* to female competition; we argue that it *is* female competition that arises only where, because of the conjunction of monogamy and strong stratification, some potential husbands offer more reproductively relevant resources than do others. We view dowry as a competitive tactic to secure such a husband.

Schlegel criticizes our evolutionary argument by noting that dowry often fails to maximize some components of reproductive success. This may be true, but both theory and data in behavioral ecology suggest that it is impossible to maximize all such components simultaneously, and that the particular trade-offs favored will depend on local ecological conditions. For example, *k*-selected species often exhibit delayed onset of reproduction, small litters, and low reproductive rates (Pianka 1974), but their status as products of natural selection is seldom doubted. Lack (1966) showed many years ago that maximizing the number of reproductive ventures does not necessarily maximize reproductive success. Thus, while our theoretical positions can be debated, our hypotheses must ultimately stand or fall based on their fit to the real world. In this regard, we agree with Schlegel that two sorts of objective tests are possible: within and across cultures.

Schlegel and Eloul (1988) used the latter approach to test their view that dowry is related to competition for status and wealth. Like us (Gaulin and Boster 1990), they evaluate their model by using it to predict the cross-cultural occurrence of dowry. Their tests are directly comparable to some of ours because we used exactly the same data base, the Standard Cross-Cultural Sample (Murdock and White 1969) as corrected by Schlegel and Eloul (1987). Due to the nature of this data base, each of us had to use proxy operationalizations of our hypothesized causal factors; thus no model should have been differentially

penalized by a lack of essential data. Even though they reduce their sample below the full 186, their model still makes many erroneous predictions about the occurrence of dowry. Like Boserup's model, Schlegel and Eloul's model has an error rate *two to four times higher* than ours (Table 1). No empirical test of these competing models has been performed using a within-cultures technique; thus, these cross-cultural comparisons provide the only systematic evidence regarding their relative validity. These comparisons unambiguously show that, of all the available models, the female-female competition model (Gaulin and Boster 1990) provides the best fit to the empirical data.

Like Schlegel, we (Gaulin and Boster 1990:1002–1003) called for a within-culture test of the various models of dowry. We applaud Schlegel's attempt to formulate such a test, and disagree with only one element of her formulation. It does not follow from our logic that dowered girls should marry earlier than do girls in societies or social strata practicing other forms of marriage transaction. We are not suggesting that the function of dowry is to get a daughter a mate before she could do so in a bride-price society. The dynamics of mate competition presumably differ between societies practicing dowry and those where bride-price is the norm. In bride-price societies polygyny is common, and unmarried females are scarce and hence rapidly claimed; this naturally leads to early marriage for girls. But bride-price delays marriage for men because it takes time to amass the transferred wealth. For the same reason, dowry competition will normally delay marriage for women. Cross-

species comparison also shows that the sex that competes most intensely for mates generally shows delayed onset of reproduction (Trivers 1972).

In closing, we should point out one of the less obvious but revealing differences between our model and that of Schlegel and Eloul (1988). They group indirect dowry and dowry together, even though the former derives from the groom's family and the latter from the bride's. By this grouping, Schlegel and Eloul suggest that these two types of transactions are functionally equivalent, presumably because of an interest in their common consequence, a transfer of wealth to the newlyweds. We, however, think some of their model's prediction errors result from this confounding. Any model of competition should attend to who pays, simply because people will bid up the stakes only for something they value. If, as Schlegel and Eloul argue, both types of dowry are the result of status and wealth competition, then the implication is that indirect dowry would result from competition by (or on behalf of) males, whereas dowry proper would result from competition by (or on behalf of) females.

If Schlegel and Eloul were to revise their model by separating these two types of dowry, it would become very convergent with our own; they would then view dowry proper as the result of competition by (or on behalf of) females for the "best" marriage partners. The only remaining difference would hinge on the definition of "best." Schlegel and Eloul would emphasize status and wealth criteria, whereas we would focus on predictors of reproductive success. Since wealth and status are highly

Table 1
Tests of various models of dowry using the Standard Cross-Cultural Sample.

Authors	Model	Test ^a	Predictions			
			Societies	Correct	Errors	% Errors
Schlegel and Eloul (1988)	Status/wealth competition	1 Subsistence	146	116	30	20.5
		2 Stratification	162	143	19	11.7
Boserup (1970)	Labor-value	3 Male-biased labor	177	139	38	21.5
		4 Plow	184	162	22	12.0
Gaulin and Boster (1990)	Female-female competition	5 Marriage-by-stratification interaction	185	176	9	4.9

^aTest 1 from Schlegel and Eloul (1988:table 3). According to their model, agricultural societies should be in their column C; thus there are (9 + 21 =) 30 errors. Test 2 from Schlegel and Eloul (1988:table 5). According to their model, highly stratified societies should have some form of dowry, and others should not; thus there are (5 + 5 + 4 + 5 =) 19 errors. Tests 3 to 5 were conducted using the coding rules specified by Gaulin and Boster (1990:998). The number of societies varies from test to test depending on the pattern of missing data.

correlated with reproductive success (Irons 1979; Hill 1984; Turke and Betzig 1985; Borgerhoff Mulder 1987; Betzig 1988; Perusse 1993), it is not clear that these hypotheses would be truly different.

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Dowry Disputes: A Reply to Schlegel

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Schlegel's rejoinder to my 1991 commentary contains both factual errors and misconceptions. Some errors are: (a) conflation of reproductive success with fertility, birthrate, and completed family size; (b) equation of late marriage with low reproductive success (the reverse is more common); (c) equation of patrilocal marriage, and the mother-in-law conflict it produces, with bride-price; (d) conflation of hypergynous dowry marriages with adoptive groom marriage in families without sons, with attraction of client sons-in-law in families with sons, and with acquisition of dowered widows as wives by cadet sons; (e) the assertion that celibate daughters are never withdrawn from nunneries to serve as wives; (f) the assumption that celibate daughters play no inclusive fitness role for their natal families, and (g) the belief that family limitation, including infanticide and abandonment, is only practiced by those without need for child labor.

Schlegel also contends (h) that noninheriting sons "reproduce relatively little." From her post-Columbian vantage point in Arizona, Schlegel may gaze southward upon a near hemispherical of descendants of cadet sons. Promiscuous and late-marrying sons of low rank are participants in familial reproductive strategies, just as are sisters in religious orders. These matters are discussed at length in my own and other anthropological and histor-