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Status, Property, and the Value on Virginity

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# **status, property, and the value on virginity**

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One way to assess a woman's autonomy is to ask whether she controls her own sexuality. Thus, the prohibition on premarital sex for females is often considered a measure of men's control over women's lives. There are certain difficulties with this assumption, however. First, the way a people feels about premarital sex is not necessarily consonant with its attitude toward extramarital sex, as many peoples allow premarital freedom but condemn adultery, while others, such as the Lovedu (Sacks 1979), insist on premarital virginity but turn a blind eye to discreet extramarital affairs. Second, this assumption fails to recognize that in most societies, the value placed on virginity applies to adolescent girls, not to adult women. With few exceptions worldwide, girls are still physically adolescent when they marry, generally within three or four years after puberty—by about 18 or younger. More important, young people are generally not social adults until they marry, so that the premarital female is socially an adolescent girl. Some societies, such as our own and that of 17th-century England (Stone 1977), for example, are exceptions to this, having a stage that I call "youth" intervening between adolescence and full adulthood. However, in most parts of the world the bride is a teenage girl who in most aspects of her life is still very much under the authority of her parents.<sup>1</sup>

If virginity is not, then, a very good measure of female subordination, we must look for other aspects of girls' and young women's lives that are associated with the proscription of premarital sex. One common notion is that virginity is valued when men have to "pay" for wives by transferring goods in the form of bridewealth to the women's families. This notion is based on the assumption that there is some innate preference for virgins which can be activated when men have the upper hand, so to speak, because they are paying for the bride. It must be noted, of course, that there is no universal preference for virgin brides. Such an assumption projects onto other cultures the attitudes that have developed historically in our own. Moreover, the belief that when men give bridewealth they pay for virgin brides is shaken when we read in Goody (1973:25) that dowry-giving societies, in which the bride's family pays, are generally intolerant of premarital sex for girls. Here the family pays to give, not to receive, a virgin bride. There may be some connection between marriage transactions and the value on virginity, but it is not readily apparent what that connection is.

To illuminate this question, it is necessary to understand the varying effects that marriage transactions—the movement of goods (most usually) or services at the time of a marriage—have on the transmission or retention of property and on the social debts incurred thereby. This question was addressed in Schlegel and Eloul (1987, 1988) and will be summarized here. Following

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*This article tests and confirms the proposition that a cultural value on the virginity of girls is, in large part, a function of the form of marriage transaction. The study is based on a worldwide sample of preindustrial societies and includes an interpretation of the association between several forms of marriage transaction and a prescription of or preference for premarital female virginity. Several other explanations for the value on virginity are also discussed. [virginity, bridewealth, dowry, marriage transactions]*

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that, marriage transactions and attitudes toward virginity will be analyzed to demonstrate that they form a meaningful pattern, albeit a pattern somewhat different from what one might initially expect. Specifically, it will be argued that the virginity of daughters protects the interests of brides' families when they use marital alliances to maintain or enhance their social status.

## **marriage transactions**

The form of marriage transaction that has received the most attention in the anthropological literature is bridewealth, goods given by the groom, usually with the assistance of his kin, to the family of the bride. Bridewealth generally does not remain with the family that receives it: it or its equivalent is used to obtain wives for brothers of the bride or an additional wife for her father. Thus, goods and women circulate and countercirculate. In the large majority of bride-wealth-giving societies, which are patrilocal, households end up with as many women as they have produced, by replacing daughters with daughters-in-law and sisters with wives.

Women exchange is also a form of replacement, the exchange being direct rather than mediated by a transfer of property. Women exchange and bridewealth are most frequently found where women have economic value through their large contribution to subsistence (cf. Schlegel and Barry 1986). In each case the result is a kind of social homeostasis, both among the families through which women and goods circulate and within the household that sooner or later gains a woman to replace each one it has lost.

Brideservice is often considered to be analogous to bridewealth, with payment in labor rather than goods. They differ significantly, however, in that the benefit of brideservice goes directly to the bride's household and is not circulated as are bridewealth goods. Thus, families with many daughters receive much free labor, while families with few get little.

While gift exchange, in which relatively equal amounts are exchanged between the families of the bride and groom, can occur at all levels of social complexity, it is often found in societies with important status differences in rank or wealth; it occurs most often in Asia, native North America, and the Pacific. Since residence is predominantly patrilocal in gift-exchanging societies, the bride-receiving household is socially, although not economically, in debt to the bride-giving one. The exchange of equivalent goods is a way of ensuring that the intermarrying families are of the same social status, as indicated by the wealth that they own or can call up from among their kin and dependents.

Status is a major consideration in dowry-giving societies. The bride's dowry is sometimes matched against the groom's settlement, thus ensuring equivalence, a usual practice among European land-owning peasants or elites. Dowry can also be used to "buy" a high-status son-in-law, a common practice in South Asia and one also known in Europe. Dowry or a bride's anticipated inheritance can be used to attract a poor but presentable groom, a client son-in-law whose allegiance will be primarily to the house into which he has married and on which he is dependent. This strategy seems to have been practiced by mercantile families in Europe and Latin America. Dowry was associated historically with the Old High Culture areas like the Mediterranean (ancient Mesopotamia, Greece, and Rome) and Asia (India, China, and Japan) and was the common form throughout Europe until recently.

The final form of marriage transaction to be examined here is indirect dowry, which contains some features of both bridewealth, in that goods are given by the groom's family, and dowry, in that the goods end up with the new conjugal couple. Sometimes the groom's kin give goods directly to the bride, but more often they give goods to her father, who then gives goods to the new couple. The latter form has frequently been confused with bridewealth, as in the Islamic *mahr*. Indirect dowry tends to be found on the fringes of the Old High Culture areas and in those Old High Culture areas, like Egypt, into which it has been introduced along with conversion to Islam, replacing the simple dowry of earlier times. In its classic form, it appears to

be a way of establishing the property rights of the conjugal couples that make up larger households, in anticipation of eventual fission. In addition, it allows for status negotiation without either family being put in the other's economic or social debt (cf. Schlegel and Eloul 1988).

There are variations within these major types, and there are additional features (such as the European dower) that are secondary and limited in distribution. In complex societies, the form of transaction may vary according to region or class. In prerevolutionary China, for example, the landed or mercantile elite gave dowry while the landless peasantry gave indirect dowry, whereas in modern China, marriage transactions have disappeared from urban areas while bridewealth has replaced indirect dowry among peasants (Fang 1990). When the forms differ by status, the preferred form, practiced by the elite, is the one considered here.<sup>2</sup>

### **marriage transactions and the value on virginity**

Information on attitudes toward premarital sex for females, or the value placed on virginity, comes from two sources. The primary one is the code "Attitude Toward Premarital Sex (Female)" in Broude and Greene (1980). Using the Standard Sample of 186 preindustrial societies, Broude and Greene found information on this subject for 141 societies. Their code is divided into six levels of value: (1) premarital sex expected; (2) premarital sex tolerated; (3) premarital sex mildly disapproved of but not punished; (4) premarital sex moderately disapproved of and slightly punished; (5) premarital sex disallowed except with bridegroom; and (6) premarital sex strongly disapproved of. For the present study, the first three categories were collapsed into "virginity not valued" and the second three into "virginity valued." I have made four alterations to the code based on my own reading of the ethnographic literature: I have changed the coding for the Burmese from 3 to 5 (Spiro 1977), for the Tikopia from 3 to 4 (Firth 1936), for the Koreans from 3 to 6 (Osgood 1951), and for the Yurok from 2 to 4 (Kroeber 1925). The societies are listed in Table 1.

The second source is a body of data collected by Herbert Barry and me on adolescent socialization in Standard Sample societies not coded by Broude and Greene. The data were collected on adolescent behavior, not cultural attitude; coders were asked to assess whether premarital sex was or was not tolerated. Because the code is less detailed than Broude and Greene's and because it measures behavior rather than attitude, I offer information only on societies in which premarital sex is not tolerated and thus, by definition, virginity is valued. (Presumably, there can be cases where premarital sex is moderately disapproved of and punished when discovered, but most adolescent girls take the risk and indulge anyway.) These societies are indicated in Table 1 in parentheses but have not been included in the tests, for to do so would introduce a bias toward the set of societies valuing virginity.

It is clear that the value on virginity is not randomly distributed among societies with all types of marriage transaction. Table 2 shows the distribution, which is statistically significant:  $p < .0001$ . Even when those societies without marriage transactions are eliminated, the distribution is still statistically significant:  $p < .001$ .

Others have also found significant associations between premarital sexual permissiveness and structural or cultural features. In studies by Murdock (1964), Goethals (1971), Eckhardt (1971), Paige (1983), Barry and Schlegel (1986), and others (see Broude's [1981] summary), sexual permissiveness is shown to be associated with the simpler subsistence technologies, absence of stratification, smaller communities, matrilineal descent, matrilocal residence, absence of belief in high gods, absence of bridewealth (but bear in mind that in earlier studies, bridewealth has been conflated with indirect dowry), high female economic contribution, little or no property exchange at marriage, and ascribed rather than achieved status. These features are all highly intercorrelated, and some correlate with types of marriage transactions (Schlegel and Eloul 1988).

Table 1. The value on virginity according to type of marriage transaction.

	Valued <sup>a</sup>	Not Valued
Bridewealth and Token Bridewealth	Lozi Mbundu (Suku) Nyakyusa Kikuyu Ibo Fon (Mende) Wolof (Bambara) Fur (Kafa) (Bogo) (Kenazi) Riffians Gheg Kapauku Kwoma Siuai (Atayal) Manchu Gros Ventre Goajiro (Abipon)	Thonga Ganda Nkundo Ashanti Tallensi Songhai Fulani Azande Nuba Shilluk Masai Gond Santal Lakher Lamet Vietnamese Tanala Javanese Badjau Alorese Orokaiva Palauans Ifugao Cilyak Greek Havasupai Saramacca
Brideservice	Montagnais Micmac Eyak Cuna Yahgan Haida	Bamba Hadza Balinese Yukaghirs Chuckchee Slave Kaska Carib Jivaro Tupinamba
Women Exchange	Mao	Mbuti Tiv Kimam
Gift Exchange	Khmer Siamese (Negri Sembilan) Manus Tikopia (Fijians) Gilbertese (Bella Coola) Twana Yurok Pawnee Klamath (Tehuelche)	Trobrianders Samoans Omaha
Dowry	Babylonians (Romans) (Basques) Irish (Russians) Punjabi (Uttar Pradesh) Burmese Chinese Koreans Japanese	Haitians

Indirect Dowry	Somali Teda Egyptians Hebrews Rwala Bedouin Turks Abkhazians (Armenians) Kurds (Khalkha Mongols) Basseri Kazak Aztecs	Hausa Tuareg Toda Lolo Lepcha Mapuche
Absence of Transaction	Amhara Vedda Chiricahua	Konso Lapps Garo Nicobarese Andamanese Iban Maori Marquesans Marshalese Trukese Yapese Ainu Ingalik Saulteaux Paiute Kutenai Huron Natchez Comanche Papago Huichol Cayapa Aymara Siriono Trumai Aweikoma

Sources: Broude and Greene (1980) and Schlegel and Eloul (1987).

<sup>a</sup>The societies in parentheses are additions to Broude and Greene's code based on data from Schlegel and Barry (1991).

This is not the first attempt to associate sexual restrictiveness with type of marriage transaction. Goody (1973, 1976) has shown that virginity is prescribed in societies in which dowry or inheritance by women is customary, and this article pursues that line of thinking. The advantage of an explanation grounded in type of marriage transaction is that it does not simply assign premarital permissiveness to the less complex societies and restrictiveness to the more complex; it suggests motives for parental control of adolescent girls' sexuality.

### **why value virginity?**

Since the burden of controlling a girl's sexuality through socialization or surveillance falls upon her family, it is instructive to consider what benefits are to be derived from preserving the virginity of daughters and sisters. Goody (1976) sees restrictiveness as a way of avoiding inappropriate marriages: by controlling a girl's sexuality, her family can better control her marriage choice, for the loss of virginity may "diminish a girl's honour and reduce her marriage chances" (Goody 1976:14). However, this presupposes that preserving virginity has some inherent value, whereas that value is precisely what needs to be explained.

I argue that virginity is valued in those societies in which young men may seek to better their chances in life by allying themselves through marriage to a wealthy or powerful family. In preserving a daughter's virginity, a family is protecting her from seduction, impregnation, and paternity claims on her child. This is most critical when certain kinds of property transactions are involved. In societies in which dowry is given (or daughters inherit), it would be attractive to seduce a dowered daughter (or heiress), demanding her as wife along with her property. Her parents would be reluctant to refuse, since the well-being of their grandchildren would depend upon their inheritance from both of their parents, and another man would be unlikely to marry the mother if it meant that he had not only to support her children but also to make them his heirs. (The widow with children would be a different matter, since these children would have received property through their father and would make no claims on their stepfather beyond support, for which in any event their labor would provide compensation.)

To illustrate that upward mobility through marriage with a dowered daughter or heiress is not foreign to dowry-giving societies, let us consider a common theme of European fairy tales. A poor but honest young man goes through trials to win the hand of the princess, who inherits her father's kingdom. Or, he wins her heart, and through the good offices of a fairy godmother or other spirit helper, they evade her wrathful father and are eventually reconciled with him. This more or less legitimate means to upward mobility is not so different from the illegitimate one, by which he wins the girl through seduction.

This line of reasoning was familiar to the 17th- and 18th-century English. As Trumbach tells it:

Stealing a son . . . was not the great crime. It was, rather, the theft of a daughter that was the real nightmare. For a woman's property became her husband's and she took his social standing. . . . To steal an heiress was therefore the quickest way to make a man's fortune—this was the common doctrine of the stage before 1710—and it had a special appeal to younger sons. [1978:101–102]

All of the dowry-giving societies in the sample value virginity except the Haitians. Nevertheless, as Herskovits, writing about Haiti, points out: "Even though pre-marital relations are commonplace, . . . the pregnancy of an unmarried girl is regarded as both reprehensible and unfortunate, and she is severely beaten for it by her family" (1971:111). Their fear of her seduction is well founded, for if they disapprove of a suitor and reject him, the young man "uses all persuasion to give her a child and, this achieved, abandons her to show his contempt for the family that has formally refused to accept him as a son-in-law" (Herskovits 1971:110). To avoid child-bearing, women and girls resort to magical means of contraception and the more effective abortion.

The majority of societies that exchange gifts and give indirect dowry also expect brides to be virgins. This is particularly true in the case of gift exchange, in which a bride's family gives quantities of property along with her, receiving a more or less equivalent amount from the family of the groom. As noted earlier, gift exchange is a way of ensuring that the two families are of equal wealth or of equal social power. Impregnating a girl would give a boy and his family a claim on that girl and an alliance with her family, even though they would have to come up

Table 2. A test of the value on virginity according to the type of marriage transaction.

Virginity valued	Marriage transaction <sup>a</sup>					Dowry and indirect dowry	Total
	None	Bride- wealth <sup>b</sup>	Bride- service	Gift exchange			
Yes	3	16	6	9		18	52
No	26	27	10	3		7	73

*N* = 125; Chi-square = 27.13; *p* < .0001.

<sup>a</sup>Women exchange is omitted because of the small number of cases.

<sup>b</sup>Includes token bridewealth.

with something themselves for the exchange (not necessarily equivalent to what a more appropriate suitor would give; see the case of the Omaha, discussed below). As in dowry-giving societies, an emphasis on virginity discourages a man who is tempted to jump the status barrier by claiming fatherhood of a woman's child. The sample does, however, include three exceptions to the general requirement of virginity in gift-exchanging societies, and it is instructive to examine these deviant cases.

Malinowski (1932) has discussed the sexual freedom of Trobriand Island girls at some length. However, we must recall that the Trobriand Islanders do not, at least ideologically, associate sexual intercourse with pregnancy. Weiner (1976:122) relates two cases in which pregnancy was attributed to magic, and her informants maintained that women could conceive without male assistance. No boy, then, can make a claim on a girl simply because he has been sleeping with her and she has become pregnant. Fatherhood can only be attained after marriage, when it is socially defined.

Among the Omaha, virginity was not considered important for most girls (as coded in Broude and Greene [1980]), but according to Fletcher and La Flesche (1911), virgins were held in greater esteem than those who had lost their virginity. It was a special privilege to marry a girl who had been tattooed with the "mark of honor," which was given to a virgin of a prominent family on the occasion of her father's or another close relative's initiation into one of the ceremonial societies. Only the marriages in prominent families involved significant gift exchange. In ordinary marriages, the young husband was expected to work a year or two for his father-in-law, making brideservice a more common feature than gift exchange. Thus, it was in the important marriages, accompanied by the exchange of goods of much value, that the bride was expected to be a virgin. Omaha elite families faced the danger that a daughter might be seduced by a youth who would persuade her to elope. As long as his family recognized the marriage and brought some gifts to the bride's father, the marriage was legitimate in the eyes of the community. Maintaining the virginity of high-status girls protected their families from unwanted alliances.

In Samoa, similarly, girls from untitled families had sexual freedom (as coded in Broude and Greene [1980]) but the daughters of titled chiefs did not. Children could be affiliated to the mother's group rather than the father's, Samoa having an ambilateral descent system. If the mother's rank was higher than the father's, the children's status would be elevated above their father's. High-status families would wish to guard their daughters against potential social climbers, who might be tempted to improve their children's position in life by seducing and marrying socially superior girls. It appears that only the arranged marriages, generally of high-status people, involved much gift exchange. Most marriages were of the "elopement" type and were much less expensive than the arranged ones (Shore 1981). Thus, as in the case of the Omaha, intracultural comparison demonstrates a correlation between the type of marriage transaction and the value on virginity.

As the tables show, the value on virginity is statistically associated with the type of marriage transaction, and this has been examined for dowry-giving and gift-exchanging societies. It is clear that when no property accompanies the marriage, virginity is of little interest. If the groom gives goods or labor, the picture is mixed, but fewer societies are restrictive than permissive. In societies in which the bride's side gives considerable property, as with gift exchange, dowry, and, in many cases, indirect dowry, virginity is most likely to be valued. Thus, there is an association between the giving of property, particularly from the bride's side, and control of the girl's sexuality. I have interpreted this as a means by which the families of girls prevent their being seduced by ineligible boys, resulting in alliances that could be an embarrassment. This is particularly the case when status negotiation is a prominent feature of marital alliances, in those societies in which families use the marriages of their daughters to maintain or enhance their social position. Such considerations are likely to be found only in rank or class societies.

We must, however, consider alternative explanations for the value on virginity. Whiting, Burbank, and Ratner (1986) have proposed that premarital permissiveness or restrictiveness is related to the age at which girls marry, reasoning that restrictiveness reflects a concern with pregnancy more than with virginity per se. Given the well-recognized biological phenomenon of adolescent subfecundity, as a result of which a pregnancy is rather unlikely in the first year or so after menarche, they claim that societies in which girls marry relatively late prohibit premarital sexual relations in order to ensure that no pregnancy occurs. Whiting and his collaborators support their argument by selecting 50 societies from the Standard Sample and rating them for "duration of maidenhood," the period between menarche and marriage, and for sexual permissiveness versus restrictiveness (see Table 3). They find that those societies with more than four years of maidenhood are restrictive, those with a maidenhood of about three years are permissive, and those with shorter maidenheds are mixed, with 13 restricting and 17 permitting sexual relations. They estimate that if sex is permitted, the probability of a pregnancy is about 30 percent when maidenhood lasts from one to two years, somewhat less than 50 percent when it lasts from two to three years, and about 60 percent when it lasts longer than three years (Whiting et al. 1986:278). They relate both age of marriage and attitude toward premarital sex to concerns about fertility and control over it. Rearranging their subsample into categories defined by marriage transaction, we see that these societies follow a pattern similar to that of the larger sample from which they are drawn (Table 4). The exception is the gift-exchange category, where by chance the researchers have selected the three permissive societies that exchange gifts: Trobriand Islands, Omaha, and Samoa.

The most problematic category for the Whiting et al. hypothesis is the group of societies in which maidenhood is short, with 13 societies that value virginity and 17 that do not (see Table 3). Their hypothesis does not account for the 13 restrictive societies, 43 percent of this cluster. It should also be noted that four of the six societies with long periods of maidenhood, all of which value virginity, are dowry-giving. It was impossible to test the distribution in this cluster of 30 societies with short maidenhood because one of the categories had no representatives and neither the Chi-square nor Fisher's Exact tests allow for an empty cell. However, the distribution follows that for the larger subsample and for the entire sample (see Table 5).

Preindustrial Europe is the world area best known for long-delayed marriage (Stone 1977), and virginity has been of concern in European cultures until very recently. Against this, how-

Table 3. The value on virginity according to the duration of maidenhood.

Virginity valued <sup>a</sup>	Long	Duration of maidenhood <sup>b</sup>		Short
		Medium	Short	
Yes	6	0		13
No	0	14		17

Source: Whiting et al. (1986).

<sup>a</sup>Positive where coded as sex prohibited or restricted; negative where coded as sex permitted or encouraged.

<sup>b</sup>Long where Whiting et al. coded the duration of maidenhood as long or very long; medium where they coded it as medium; short where they coded it as short or absent.

Table 4. Virginity and marriage transactions for the subsample.

Virginity valued	None	Bride-wealth <sup>a</sup>	Bride-service	Marriage transaction				Total
				Gift exchange	Women exchange	Dowry	Indirect dowry	
Yes	1	7	2	0	0	4	3	17
No	8	9	8	3	2	0	3	33

Source of subsample: Whiting et al. (1986).

<sup>a</sup>Includes token bridewealth.

Table 5. Marriage transactions and the value on virginity when maidenhood is short.

Virginity valued	Contributes <sup>a</sup>	Transaction according to bride's family's contribution	
		Does not contribute <sup>b</sup>	
Yes	5		8
No	0		17

<sup>a</sup>Gift exchange and indirect dowry (no cases of dowry among these 30 societies).

<sup>b</sup>All other forms, including absence of transactions.

ever, we can pose Southeast Asia, known from historical records to have been a region of later marriage (that is, the late teens and early twenties) before Islam became established and, more recently, in areas outside Islam's range. In the Philippines in the 1820s, the mean age of a woman's first marriage was about 20.5; in Hindu Bali in the 1940s, it was 18, as against 14 in Muslim Java (Reid 1988:158–160). Southeast Asia has also been a region of sexual permissiveness, before and beyond Islamic practice, a fact amply documented by observers of all sorts since the 16th century. If a girl became pregnant, the couple married; failing that, in some areas infanticide was practiced or the fetus was aborted. Abortion is reported to have been quite common in the 16th-century Philippines, and it is referred to in a 17th-century Malay epic as a normal occurrence (Reid 1988).

The elite, however, were sexually restrictive even before the advent of Islam and in non-Islamic countries like Thailand. Speaking of the wealthy urban class, Reid (1988:157) notes that daughters were guarded "because their marriages involved both property and status." The vast displays of goods in the gift exchanges of the landed and mercantile elite were a far cry from the simple prestations of the peasantry, among whom choice of son-in-law was not a matter of state or commerce. Thus, while the "long maidenhood" explanation holds for Europe, it does not fit the facts of Southeast Asia, whereas the "property and status" explanation applies to both regions.

Another explanation for the prescription of virginity, this time one limited to the pastoral belt from North Africa into Central Asia, is grounded in ecological concerns (Schneider 1971). Schneider relates men's control over female sexuality to their general competitiveness in pastoral regions, where ecological resources are limited and unpredictable, and to the difficulties involved in keeping related men linked to one another in common-interest groups, groups that are vulnerable to fragmentation into self-centered families. In such societies, Schneider asserts, women become a kind of resource whose disposal rests with those who dominate them, and they are only available to other men through their fathers, brothers, and other male kin. Common concern over female kin provides a focus for male kin bonding.

In many pastoral societies the virginity of daughters and sisters (like the chastity of wives) is a marker of the integrity of individual men and of lineages. But whether pastoralism *per se* is a determining factor in the value on virginity may be questioned. The Standard Sample contains 17 societies for which pastoralism is the major subsistence technique, and we have information on the value on virginity for all but one of them: nine value it, seven do not. While the distribution according to marriage transactions is not significant, seven of the nine societies valuing virginity practice indirect dowry or gift exchange. (Three societies practicing one or the other of these forms do not value virginity.) These seven societies are all engaged in commercial—as distinct from subsistence—pastoralism, and they inhabit the fringes of the Old High Culture areas of the Mediterranean and East Asia. The societies Schneider discusses may all be pastoral, but in my view pastoralism is less instrumental than are characteristics of property relations. One important feature of property relations is the disbursement of property; I argue that the consequences of disbursing property through dowry, indirect dowry, or gift exchange are likely to make it desirable for parents of daughters to guard their virginity.

Yet another explanation is offered by Ortner (1978), who claims that virginity is characteristic of state societies because in such societies women tend to marry up. (In fact, this is true for India but less so for preindustrial Europe, where families used dowries to bring in sons-in-law of varying statuses.) Virginity, she argues, serves to symbolize women's unavailability until given by fathers and brothers. By this argument, women of lower status should be more concerned about virginity than women of high status, who may only marry equals. However, I know of no evidence to suggest that elite families guarded their daughters' virginity less than lower-status families did, either in Asia or in Europe (although aristocratic married women had more sexual freedom, at least in England and France in the 18th and 19th centuries, than did women of the bourgeoisie [Goncourt and Goncourt 1928 (1887)]). The high illegitimacy and premarital pregnancy rates among peasants in precapitalist Europe, for example, suggest a laxness in conformity to the ideal of virginity (cf. Stone 1977; Vann 1977). It is true, however, that many of these pregnancies were the result of sexual relations between engaged persons. Among the elite, who gave considerable property and held status to be a central issue, daughters were more carefully guarded.

Ortner develops her argument in a later article (Ortner 1981) in response to the challenge that the virginity of high-ranking girls in Polynesia presented to her earlier position, which associated virginity with state societies. Here, she follows Goody (1976) in recognizing that families control the sexuality of their daughters in order to make the best marriage alliances, the virgin daughter being someone who is withheld. However, she goes on to explain the value on virginity in symbolic terms: "virginity is an expression of high value of women" in societies in which dowry (Asia), inheritance of property (Europe), or inheritance of rank (Polynesia) makes women more nearly equal to men than in tribal societies (Ortner 1981:400–401). While we can accept the assertion of a high value on women in Europe and Polynesia, such an assertion is difficult to reconcile with what is known of the legal and social statuses of women in such parts of Asia as China and Hindu or Moslem India.

Let us look at another region where women inherited rank and property and were the recipients of marital payments, Southeast Asia in the 15th to 18th centuries (Reid [1988:146–147] uses the term *bridewealth*, but from his description it is clear that indirect dowry was the custom.) All over insular and peninsular Southeast Asia, among both urban and tribal peoples, women had not only a high measure of economic and social autonomy but also, through their reproductive role, "magical and ritual powers which it was difficult for men to match" (Reid 1988:146). Yet women's sexual freedom before marriage and between marriages, among these oft-divorcing and remarrying peoples, was noted by all manner of European observers and was freely acknowledged by Southeast Asians themselves. Illegitimacy was avoided through socially condoned abortion, a possibility in an area with quite sophisticated medical procedures, or infanticide. This negative case prompts me to look more closely at Ortner's argument.

Virginity, Ortner asserts (1981), is an expression of the high value placed on women in complex traditional societies, because in such societies women's high status is due to their relation to their male kin and not to their reproductivity. As wives—and thus nonvirgins—they are attached to men who are not kin, to whom they have a subordinate relationship. It is only as sisters, in their relations to men of their own descent group, that they have value, for their kin status, which is high, overrides their gender status, which is low. When they become wives, they are acting as females rather than as kin. (For another view on sisters and wives, see Sacks [1979].)

There are two problems with this argument. The first is empirical. Weiner (1988a) has carefully detailed the *high* value put on female reproductivity in Polynesia and the sacredness that attaches to it. Furthermore, as our discussion on Southeast Asia has indicated, there have been state societies in which women were highly valued and virginity was not an important issue. The second problem is logical. There is no inherent reason why nonvirgin sisters cannot be as highly valued by their male kin as virgin sisters are: it is marriage, not rupture of the hymen,

that makes a woman subordinate. The value on virginity is clearly an elaboration of some feature of social relations, as Ortner's argument implies; however, I do not believe that it has to do with the kin status-gender status discrepancy.

In fact, there is a second argument in Ortner's article. It is that a girl's virginity represents the hold of her kin over her in order to control her marriage: she is the "bait" by which they bring in desirable male in-laws. This argument does not conflict with mine, but it is incomplete. Kinsmen could still control the bestowal of a nonvirgin bride, perhaps keeping any illegitimate child when they send her to her husband. In many bridewealth societies, the Ijo of Nigeria being one example (Hollos and Leis 1986), a bastard is a not unwelcome addition to the girl's natal household and is no impediment to her marriage. In short, a man has no reason to press a paternity claim unless some good—wealth, rank, or status—passes from mother to child and a claim on that child is a claim on the good that goes with it.

The explanation for the value on virginity in Samoa, discussed above, applies generally to Polynesia. Nevertheless, a different line of thinking, closer to the ideology of Polynesia, can be followed to construct a symbolic interpretation of virginity there. In Polynesia, "firsts" are accorded greater significance in general—first-born children, for example, outrank those born later. (The Hebrews had a similar custom.) Throughout Polynesia, the first-born child has a sacred character (Weiner 1988a), and high-ranking families are unlikely to want their special-status child to result from a misalliance.

## discussion

I do not wish to suggest that the form of marriage transaction alone determines the positive or negative value on virginity. Although the correlation between them is statistically significant, there are deviations, some of which were examined earlier in this article. It may be, of course, that more detailed analyses will show these and similar cases not to be deviant. The amount of dowry that Haitian peasants give is so small, their being so poor, that dowry may be irrelevant as a means of status improvement for boys. The cases of the Samoans and the Omaha illustrate the problem faced by the cross-cultural researcher when different segments of a society follow different practices: gift exchange, coded as the preferred form of marriage transaction, is, strictly speaking, a custom of the elite, who value virginity, whereas the coding for sexual permissiveness applies to the majority of the population, who exchange no gifts or only gifts of little value. Case-by-case analysis, thus, might well reduce the number of societies that appear to deviate from the pattern.

In spite of the lack of perfect concordance, a distribution pattern associating marriage transactions with the value on virginity does exist. When family status considerations are crucial to marriage arrangements, as they are when property accompanying marriage is related to status concerns, families will protect their daughters' virginity as a means of ensuring that undesirable suitors cannot claim them by making them pregnant. Virginity is prescribed, at least among the elite, in those societies in which wealth, rank, or stratification differentiates categories of people, although virginity may or may not be valued by social groups of lower status.<sup>3</sup>

The question of the value on virginity revolves around two issues: whether premarital sexual intercourse leads to pregnancy, and whether biological fatherhood alone gives a man a claim on a child and its mother. There should be less concern over virginity when sexual intercourse is not likely to lead to pregnancy than when it is. With "short maidenhood," to use Whiting et al.'s term, pregnancy is less likely than it is when marriage is delayed for several years. Nevertheless, in the subsample (see Table 3), 43 percent of the cases with short maidenhood do value virginity: 39 percent of these exchange gifts or give indirect dowry. Eight cases are unexplained by either length of maidenhood or form of marriage transaction.

Safe, socially condoned abortion is a reliable way of preventing unwanted births, and virginity is not such an issue if abortion is freely available, as in Southeast Asia. Even there, however,

the elite have secluded their daughters, possibly in imitation of the Hindu, Buddhist, or Moslem aristocrats whom they have emulated in other ways (cf. Reid 1988:163).

Although abortive techniques are widely known and practiced, even where proscribed (Devereux 1976), there is little evidence to indicate the extent to which illicit abortions are available to unmarried girls. Desperate girls, with the help of their mothers, surely must resort to them, as anecdotal information indicates; but whether or not they are successful, and whether or not the girls can keep them secret, are open to question. Illicit abortion is a last-ditch measure for preventing unwanted births and must take a distant second place to the maintenance of virginity.

Impregnating a girl does not automatically give a boy or man a claim to her child or to her. In the Trobriand Islands, as we have seen, biological fatherhood alone is simply not recognized. In other places, it may be recognized without giving the impregnator a paternity claim. Such a claim may have to be paid for either directly or indirectly through bridewealth and marriage to the mother; if it is not, the child is absorbed into the mother's kin group. This practice appears to be more common in Africa than in other regions, although the question requires a study in its own right. I suggest that the acceptance of illegitimate children is greater when children are a distinct economic asset. They are likely to be so in underpopulated areas, such as are found throughout much of Africa (Kopytoff 1987). In such places, the availability of labor rather than of land is the major constraint on the economic success and expansion of the productive unit, the family and the kin group, and illegitimate origins do not detract from the potential labor value of a child. A similar explanation may hold for some European peasantries.

Where land is in short supply in preindustrial societies and family resources consist of private property, heirship is a central concern. A bastard is less likely to be welcomed, since it is totally dependent on the mother's family and does not draw in resources from the father. Bastards may be better received when the father is of much higher status than the mother—when he is, for example, a king or the noble impregnator of a peasant girl. In such cases, so long as paternity is acknowledged, the child provides a link, albeit a left-handed one, to wealth and power, a link that otherwise would be beyond the reach of the mother's family.

If children are not an unqualified asset to the mother's family, the rules of social life are likely to include the prescription that fathers take responsibility for their children, thus bringing biological and social fatherhood closer together. The responsibility for one's child can be restated as the right to that child, and biological fatherhood becomes a claim on social fatherhood. When the status of the mother is equal to or lower than that of the impregnator, it is to her advantage to use the rule of responsibility to press for marriage or at least support, so long as the impregnator is willing (or is unable to escape). Turning this on its head, when the mother is of greater wealth or higher status, particularly when her status or property will be inherited by her child, it is to the advantage of the impregnator to use the rule of responsibility to press his claim on the child and its mother. It is in precisely such situations, I propose, that virginity is valued, as it is the surest way of preventing such claims.

This is not to deny that virginity may acquire secondary meanings. In its extreme form, a value on virginity can lead to a value on chastity so great that widows are discouraged from remarriage. Such was the case in India for the higher castes (Ullrich 1977), throughout prerevolutionary China (Chiao 1971), and in early Christian Europe (Verdon 1988). In such places celibacy comes to be seen as a spiritually higher state than married sexuality. In this form, the ideal of virginity has been incorporated into some religions and has been diffused along with conversion.

While the 18th-century English, living at a time of expanding wealth and social mobility, were aware of the social advantage of seducing an heiress and spoke freely about it, it is improbable that most peoples would give this as the reason for keeping their daughters virginal. In Eurasia, at any rate, one is much more likely to get explanations involving purity and the shame that follows its loss. We weave significance around the hard facts of existence, and vir-

ginity, a practical concern, can be a sign of spiritual purity when the invasion of the body implies the invasion of the spirit or when the seduction of female kin comes to symbolize the violability of the lineage.

The idealization of virginity is most common in Eurasia, and it is found in some other areas, such as Polynesia or native North America, where certain categories of girls are expected to be virginal. It is noteworthy that belief in the purity or spiritual power of virginity, chastity, and celibacy developed in those regions where dowry or gift-exchange was the established form or the form practiced by the elite and aspired to by those who would imitate them. Ideology does not arise *de novo* but is grounded in existential concerns and issues. I suggest that the ideology of virginity has its source in pragmatic concerns about status maintenance and improvement.<sup>4</sup>

As a practical matter, ensuring that daughters and sisters remain virginal puts a heavy burden of surveillance on parents and brothers. The effort required is worthwhile when the stakes are high, as when considerable property and status are involved, or the secondary meanings of virginity are such that the purity of the girl and thus the honor of her family are at issue. In many parts of the Mediterranean world, control over female sexuality is a lived metaphor for control over social relations. The transgressing girl is defying her male kin and giving away what only they have the right to bestow (cf. Schneider 1971).

Elsewhere, particularly among poorer people in societies that value virginity, the daughter's choice of husband is of minor consequence. Thus, there is no point in restricting her. Even when virginity is generally accorded a high value, it may be an ideal to which only a minority aspire. Recognizing this makes it easier to reconcile the seeming contradiction between the high value placed on virginity and the high rate of bastardy at various times and places throughout European history.

### **implications of the proposition**

Regarding a value on virginity as a way of forestalling male social-climbing through seduction causes us to take a fresh look at the interest, in some places, in seducing virgins and the self-congratulation or acclaim by peers that accompanies the successful boy or man in this pursuit. It has nothing to do with sexual pleasure, for the experienced girl or woman is a more satisfying sexual partner than the virgin. What, then, is the point?

First, of course, is the thrill of the forbidden. However, seducing a virgin can be as much of a coup in sexually permissive societies like Samoa as it is in the restrictive ones. In a discussion of adolescent sexuality in the Trobriand Islands, Weiner (1988b:71) has pointed out that attracting lovers is not a frivolous pastime but rather "the first step toward entering the adult world of strategies, where the line between influencing others while not allowing others to gain control of oneself must be carefully learned." If the game of seduction is serious business, then how much more is this true when seduction can lead to status improvement. We can understand the Cinderella story and its variants as a tale of upward mobility for women through sexual attraction—but what about upwardly mobile men?

Winning the heart of a high-status woman as a path to a better life may be a male fantasy in all societies that are divided by rank or class, or at least those in which men will not be killed or severely punished for the attempt. Boys and youths have nothing to lose and much to gain if they can make a paternity claim on the child of a high-status girl. In such a setting, where only a few can succeed, all boys will be tempted to refine their skills with virgins of their own rank while hoping for their big chance with a *taupou* (the Samoan "village princess") or her equivalent.

It is well recognized that women use their sexual attractiveness to try to improve their position through a socially advantageous marriage or liaison, when such possibilities are open to them. (The seclusion of girls not only protects daughters against seduction but also protects sons

against inconvenient romantic attachments, thus reinforcing parental control over the marriages of children of both sexes.) It should not surprise us that men and boys do the same if the opportunity arises. When sexual success can be translated into social success, it is predictable that men and boys will make themselves attractive to women and that sexual exploits will become a major topic of discussion, teasing, and boasting. In such cases, male competitiveness is channeled into overt sexual competition. The man who seduces a dowered virgin has his fortune made.

## Conclusion

The trend in the modern world follows the pattern established for the preindustrial societies in the sample. With readily available contraception and abortion, extramarital sexual relations do not have to result in pregnancy or illegitimate birth. Even if a paternity claim is pressed, there is no obligation in our individual-centered society to honor it, as economic opportunities for women as well as welfare payments by the state make it possible to support a child without a husband.

Equally important, the dowry has lapsed in most European and European-derived cultures. Parental investment in daughters is increasingly in the form of education, not dowry.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, the daughter's choice of a husband does not have the significance for the family today that it did in earlier times. For most people in the industrial world, there is little in the way of a family estate to preserve. Even among the rich, a rebellious daughter and her husband can be cut out of the will, since in modern societies the disposal of assets is up to the individual with legal ownership of them. Thus, a daughter's choice of a husband is not critical to the well-being of the family and the maintenance of its assets.

Most commentators on the "sexual revolution" point to the availability of new contraception and abortion technology as the deciding factor in the changing of our sexual habits. But contraception and abortion have a long history in civilization; techniques to reduce fertility have been known and used in Europe for centuries, albeit clandestinely. Technology alone, without significant changes in social relations, is not enough to alter such deep-seated cultural values as the value on virginity. As marriage transactions disappear and social status is gained more through achievement than through the family into which one is born or marries, parental control over marriage declines and disappears. The choice of a son-in-law is no longer a central concern, and the virginity of daughters loses its salience.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup>Data on adolescence come from Schlegel and Barry (1991), a cross-cultural study of the behavior and treatment of adolescents in preindustrial societies.

<sup>2</sup>Coding on marriage transactions can be found in Schlegel and Eloul (1987). The Pawnee form has been recoded from absence to gift exchange, based on Grinnell (1891). The Somali, Teda, and Toda forms have been recoded from bridewealth to indirect dowry, based on Lewis (1961), Chapelle (1957), and Walker (1986), respectively.

<sup>3</sup>The Vietnamese and Javanese coded for this sample are peasant communities, where virginity is not valued (see Table 1). It is valued, however, among the elite of Vietnam and Java.

<sup>4</sup>We have been dealing with ideology, and it is fair to ask whether all peoples who value virginity enforce restrictive norms on girls to an equal degree. This is obviously not the case: when girls are secluded or are killed for transgressing, there are many fewer cases of loss of virginity than when girls have freedom of movement and are not severely punished. These distinctions are inherent in the Broude and Greene (1980) code.

<sup>5</sup>Dowry is no longer an expected feature of marriage in northern and central Europe; that is, it has declined as industrialization has expanded. In Europe today, it is most often encountered in rural or newly industrializing groups along the eastern Mediterranean or in the Balkans. While dowry is still a prominent feature of marriage negotiations in India, a well-educated girl is not expected to provide the same amount of dowry as an uneducated one; in this case, it appears to be the prestige value, rather than the economic value, of the bride that compensates for a reduced dowry.

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