



Human capital, true love, and gender roles: is sex destiny?

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Abstract

We assume optimal specialization (in the nuclear family) involves one partner doing ‘homework’ and the other ‘wagework’. Basic human capital for one or the other is imparted to individuals through early childhood training. Mates are chosen on the basis of noneconomic criteria-‘true love’. Because love strikes randomly after basic human capital is acquired, a coordination problem arises in choosing complementary specializations. Even with no discrimination, there exist equilibria characterized by gender roles – perfect correlation between sex and family roles. There may also exist other equilibria in which the correlation between sex and family roles is imperfect and individuals are trained by aptitude. We rank the equilibria when they coexist and demonstrate that affirmative action policies can increase average welfare by eliminating some equilibria. The analysis is conducted in a framework which characterizes individuals by training, by aptitude, and by family role in a $2 \times 2 \times 2$ model. In this framework, we formalize the equality of the sexes as well as the relative importance of nature versus nurture and various types of training. ©1999 Elsevier Science B.V. All rights reserved.

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1. Introduction

Only recently have economic theorists seriously attempted to understand the economic causes and implications of gender roles in society¹. Understanding gender roles is difficult

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¹ The distinction between the terms ‘sex’ and ‘gender’ is not always obvious. The Oxford dictionary defines gender as “sex expressed by social or cultural distinctions.” In the context of our paper, sex is a biological given whereas gender roles are endogenously derived in the equilibrium.

for standard economic theory because it requires modeling the organization of the family and the interaction of the household with the marketplace. The approach taken in recent papers has been to model the family as consisting of individuals each maximizing their own utility within a thick blanket of externalities.² In this context gender roles have been explained as emerging from market asymmetries which yield bargaining asymmetries. The battle in the economic market and its implication for the battle between the sexes has produced some insightful and plausible explanations for patterns of family and social organization.

We believe that this methodological individualist approach is a fruitful one for the economic analysis of the family. However, in this paper we step back from methodological individualism and take a different approach, one in which the battles in the market and within the household are put aside. We do this to ask what we believe is a more basic question: Might gender roles emerge in a society in which markets and households treat the sexes equally? And the subsequent question: If gender roles emerge would they be efficient? To this end we build a model that concentrates on what we consider to be the standard building blocks of a modern society. Societies consist of families in which adults divide the responsibilities of earning income and raising children. The family is organized in the way to best facilitate these tasks. This depends on the aptitude and training of the adults. The formation of families is a bit of a mystery, one we model as depending on criteria that are not economic, and which gives rise to a fundamental coordination problem.

In particular, our basic model has four key ingredients. First, we restrict attention to the nuclear family consisting of two adults, one male and one female, and an unspecified number of children. Second, we assume that specialization within the nuclear family is efficient. The most efficient specialization involves one adult working in the home, raising children, and the other adult working in the marketplace. Third, early training of children by parents can be done in only one of the two spheres of activity. Children can be trained in skills and attitudes best suited to either the home or the marketplace; these skill sets are mutually exclusive. Four, families are formed randomly, on the basis of noneconomic criteria which we flippantly call ‘true love’. We discuss the rationale for our specific assumptions and how relaxing them affects the results in the body of the paper.

These four ingredients give rise to a coordination problem in choosing complementary specializations. Family welfare is maximized if complementary human capital investments have been made before marriage. If partners are known in advance, then it is possible to make the appropriate investments. However, individuals do not know whom they are going to marry, and choose mates on the basis of ‘true love’. Since true love strikes randomly, there is a coordination problem.

When aptitudes are homogeneous, the ex ante optimal investment decision involves individuals of one sex acquiring the specialization believed to best complement the specialization chosen by the majority of the members of the opposite sex. This leads to two stable Nash equilibria with gender specialization: either all men do wamework and all women homework, or the opposite. For individuals ‘sex is destiny’ within each equilibrium, though the coexistence of the equilibria implies that sex is not destiny for society.

² For recent surveys of the literature on the family see Lundberg and Pollak (1996) and Bergstrom (1997). Also, see Ott (1992) for a detailed analysis of the bargaining approach to the household.

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