

The Lack of Available Economic Data When Researching Matrilineal Societies

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Abstract

There is limited economic and statistical data on matrilineal societies, for reasons that are addressed in the conclusion. However, there are four key articles, “Do Women Supply More Public Goods than Men? Preliminary Experimental Evidence from Matrilineal and Patriarchal Societies” by Anderson, et al. (2008), “Gender, Competitiveness, and Socialization at a Young Age: Evidence from a Matrilineal and a Patriarchal Society” by Anderson et al. (2013), “Gender Differences in Risk Attitudes: Field Experiments on The Matrilineal Mosuo and The Patriarchal Yi” by Gong, et al. (2012), and “Gender Differences in The Dictator Experiment: Evidence from The Matrilineal Mosuo And the Patriarchal Yi” by Gong, et al. (2015), that discuss economic aspects of the matrilineal Khasi in India and the Mosuo in China. These articles, and their limitations are explored from a critical feminist perspective to provide additional insights and analyses. Then, the author details the issues with conducting a large-scale data collection on matrilineal societies, and how these issues they might be mitigated.

Keywords: Matrilineal, Data Collection, Khasi, Mosuo, Feminist Economics, Economic Experiments

Introduction

This article is part of a larger research agenda that addresses the question: How can transnational feminism and Marxist feminism advance the research produced by Engels, Gimbutas, and Modern Matriarchal Studies to create economic models of matrilineal societies? After conducting an expansive literature review that crosses disciplines and time periods, one can conclude that there is not enough information to produce economic models of matrilineal societies. There are no readily available economic models that do not assume patriarchy, and there is little economic research on matrilineal societies in general. Although, some matrilineal societies do fall under patriarchy, there are many that would be considered matriarchal. In West Africa, specifically the Ashanti of Ghana, and East Africa, specifically the Makuwa of Northern Mozambique, these societies are patriarchal and matrilineal. Men still dominate the socio-economic structure, but inheritance is transferred through female lineage. Göettner-Abendroth (2012), classifies the Mosuo and Khasi as matriarchal, where women hold more formal power than in patriarchal societies.

There is a handful of economic experiments, that are discussed below, on more well-known matrilineal societies but there is no in-depth economic analysis that has been done by someone

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with a background in economics, at least not in journals published in English. There is much analysis from anthropologists, archeologists, and social scientists on the social aspects of these societies. However, there is little economic and statistical data available since these societies are surrounded by patriarchal clans and cannot be differentiated in regional statistics and economic data.

Overview of Previous Research

There are four articles that provide small-scale economic and statistical analyses of the Mosuo in Southwest China on Lugu Lake and the Khasi in Meghalaya in Northeast India; both societies have additional characteristics that would classify them as matriarchal (Göettner Abendroth, 2012). In “Do Women Supply More Public Goods than Men? Preliminary Experimental Evidence from Matrilineal and Patriarchal Societies”, Anderson, et al. (2008) explore whether women produce more public goods than men by conducting experiments in similar environments within three different societies in Northeast India: a matrilineal Khasi village and two patriarchal Assamese villages. Participants were asked to choose the amount of money to place in the individual exchange and the group exchange and they used the traditional public good game exactly from James Andreoni (1995) (Anderson, et al., 2008, p. 377).

First, fewer people were strong free-riders, those who do not contribute anything to the public good, in the matrilineal society compared to the non-matrilineal societies; second, public good provision is higher in the matrilineal society. Third, this higher level of provision is due primarily to male, rather than female, differences in contributing to the public good (Anderson et al., 2008, p. 377). These results support the theory that matrilineal and matrifocal societies are more communal and beneficial to the individuals. By having fewer free riders in the group, there can be more economic prosperity which improves quality of life, even if income and resources are limited.

In “Gender, Competitiveness, and Socialization at a Young Age: Evidence from a Matrilineal and a Patriarchal Society”, Anderson et al. (2013) were interested to learn if girls and boys have biological differences in competitiveness as they age, or if the phenomenon is based on societal pressures. They studied girls from 7 to 15 in rural villages in Northeast India and concluded that in a matrilineal society, there is no difference: In a patriarchal society, girls become less competitive around puberty (Anderson, et al., 2013, p. 1438).

The average behavior of children in the matrilineal society did not change relative to that of the 7-year-old as they age. In the patriarchal society, however, boys become more competitive and girls less competitive around puberty (Anderson, et al., 2013, p. 1438). As a result, 15-year-old girls were significantly less likely to compete than boys around the same age, and they observed a strong gender gap in the patriarchal society that is like the one found with adults (Anderson, et al., 2013, p. 1438). Although their findings were in support of societal differences having an impact on competitiveness, it is important to note that socialization might act along with biological forces in determining the difference between the matrilineal and patriarchal societies around puberty (Anderson, et al., 2013, p. 1441).

In “Gender Differences in Risk Attitudes: Field Experiments on The Matrilineal Mosuo and The Patriarchal Yi”, Gong, et al. (2012) conducted experiments on two different risk tasks with subjects from two neighboring ethnic groups, the matrilineal Mosuo and the patriarchal Yi in China. Women were found to be more risk averse than men at the standard investment risk (IR) and the compound risk (CR) within both ethnic groups, yet the gender gap was smaller in the Mosuo. Regressions showed that socio-economic factors such as family size, family head, education, age, and income also have significant effects on subject’s risk choices. According to Gong, et al. (2012):

In both IR and CR, one is willing to take more risk when she or he has a bigger family. This is quite reasonable, as family members provide the most reliable social security to each other, which also partly explains why Mosuo people are in general less risk averse than Yi people. Family heads are more risk averse in IR. The higher level of responsibility associated with being a family head may impose higher costs on risk taking. In addition, a less reckless (female) candidate may be more likely to be selected as the head of a Mosuo family. (p. 64)

In “Gender Differences in The Dictator Experiment: Evidence from The Matrilineal Mosuo And the Patriarchal Yi”, Gong, et al. (2015) wanted to learn how culture, especially that of gender-specific economic and social activities that vary, are different as they relate to gender and social preferences. Since most related experiments were conducted in Western countries, with similar economic and cultural backgrounds, the authors needed to look for evidence over a variety of cultures that vary sufficiently in how the roles for man and woman are defined. The researchers selected the matrilineal Mosuo and the patriarchal Yi in Southwestern China. The Mosuo and Yi are very similar in genetic makeup, so there would not be any differences in behavior or preferences due to genetic variations (Gong, et al. 2015, p. 304).

Gong, et al. (2015) chose the dictator game because it provided a good test for gender differences in social preferences, while at the same time helped to reduce risks. In the game, two people are randomly paired, and the dictator is given money, in this case 10 RMB (Gong, et al. 2015, p. 305). In private, the dictator decides how much money they would like to keep and how much they would like to donate. Gong, et al. (2015) conclude that the Mosuo men are much more generous than the Mosuo women, and this phenomenon has not been seen in any of the other studies using the dictator experiment. According to Gong, et al. (2015), “culture induced, and thus exogenous, gender differences in social and economic roles play a crucial role in shaping gender differences in pro-social behavior such as dictator giving” (p. 310). In some other studies, the researchers found that women were more generous than the men, and some found that the women were equally generous as the men. The results of this research are significant because they demonstrate that men are not biologically predetermined to certain gifting behavior by showing that social norms may cause systematically different behavior of subgroups within a society (Gong, et al. 2015, p. 311). According to Gong, et al. (2015), “different gender-specific social norms may result in significantly different gender differences across societies” (p. 311).

Conclusion

These economic experiments and case studies have been helpful to this research project, yet they do not provide a comprehensive economic analysis of matrilineal societies or even one matrilineal society, like the Mosuo. It is very difficult to collect the kind of data needed to do so, and it is very costly. These societies are not neatly confined to a specific area so one cannot take geographic statistics gathered by a state or country to use for analysis. This data is difficult to collect, but there are very few economists that are interested in studying the innerworkings of matrilineal societies. It is not clear why, at this point, but could be due to the lack of interest in research that is overly “feminist”. Although the above researchers and authors did not publish in feminist or radical political economics journals and used mainstream economic methods, they took on a topic that shows ways of living that are not directly under patriarchy.

Another issue when researching these societies, apart from the various costs, is that they are small and usually indigenous. One must take extra precaution to ensure the research is not biased from Western and modern thought, and that the information collected is agreed upon by those who provide it. It would be disingenuous to collect this data and use it in a manner that does not accurately reflect the economic structures of these societies. One way that this could be mitigated

is by using a participatory framework, by engaging the people of these societies in the data collection phases to ensure there is accuracy and respect. Sometimes economists remove themselves from the research to appear impartial, but researchers have biases, whether realised or not. Using a participatory mentality helps to alleviate the issues that comes with biased economic research and creates a more realistic view of the world.

Although the hope is that this research project will, one day, produce economic models of matrilineal societies, it is evident that this will not happen for years to come as many steps are needed first. Collaborations with other scholars who have already done research on these societies, funding to collect the necessary data, organising the data into usable files, and large-scale analysis will have to take place beforehand. Although this is not impossible, the task is large and seemingly daunting.

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