

# **A Reasoned Choice Approach: How Economic and Ideological Factors Interact to Shape the Timing of Marriage**

**Yingchun Ji**  
**UNC-CH**

## **Extended Abstract**

Family scholars have long been interested in both economic and ideational factors related to family behavior (Caldwell 1982; Cherlin 2005; Preston 1985; Thornton 2001). However, most discussion of the interactive influence of the two has stayed primarily at the theoretical level. Rarely has empirical research examined the interaction between the two dimensions. The micro-economic cost-benefit calculation approach and planned behavior theory are synthesized here to develop a theoretical framework called the reasonable choice. Following this integrated approach, hypotheses are tested on how individual socioeconomic achievements and various attitudes and subjective norms towards marriage, independently and interactively, shape the timing of marriage in Nepal's Chitwan Valley.

According to the micro economic rational choice approach of (Becker, 1980 & 1991), individuals are rational and forward looking. They expect, calculate and assess cost-benefit of the decision that they are going to make and maximize the utility of it. Evaluation of economic utility is the core of the rational human being's decision-making. In the case of marriage as a long time commitment to share costs and benefits for living together, utility-oriented individuals would probably favor those who have higher socioeconomic attainment as potential spouses in the marriage market. Calculating costs and benefits, individuals probably think those having good socioeconomic achievements at present will continue to do so and have a better chance to upwardly mobile. Marrying such a spouse would mean a stable and better-off family life, at least in terms of economics. Therefore, having higher education and nonfamily working experience in the setting of Nepal would make one an attractive spouse candidate. Being attractive on the marriage market does not necessarily mean that one would be more motivated to get married in general. However, in the setting of Nepal where marriage is universal to men and women, it is very likely that those with better education and those with nonfamily work experience are more likely to move to marriage faster than their less well-off counterparts.

According to the psychological theory of reasoned action (Ajzen & Fishbein 1980; Fishbein & Ajzen 1975), individuals' behavior is determined by their intention towards certain behavior, and the intention is the function of their own attitudes and subjective norms. Attitudes are evaluations of the potential outcome and can be compatible with cost-benefit calculations. Subjective norms are the perceptions one has of important others' acceptance (or disapproval) of one's behavior. However, the formation of certain attitudes is not only related to rational evaluation of costs and benefits of the outcome, but also related to influences from important others and culture/social norm in general. Take examples of attitudes about the ideal age, attitudes about whether girls should marry before menstruation and subjective norm perceiving whether it is important to one's mother to get married soon. Therefore, an individual who thinks that 18 is an ideal age for marriage is likely to marry sooner than someone else who thinks that 22 is an ideal age for marriage. An individual who regards it better for girls to get married before menstruation probably would get married earlier than others who disagree. An individual who thinks it is important to his/her mother to get married probably will move to marriage faster.

However, those who have higher education or have nonfamily work experience do not necessarily share similar attitudes or subjective norms towards marriage. This leads to the question of whether socioeconomic attainment will influence the marriage timing of those with different attitudes or subjective norm in the same way. Will they follow the same or different trajectories towards marriage? Greenman and Xie (2008)'s research on income inequality by gender and race/ethnicity suggests that the role specialization theory (the rational choice theory) applies differently for Whites, Blacks, Hispanics and Asians in income inequality; that is, forces from the ideational dimension condition forces from the economic dimension to produce income inequality. It is possible that in the area of marriage formation, there can be a similar pattern that the effects of socioeconomic attainments are dependent on the effects of individuals' attitudes and subjective norms on the timing of marriage. For example, for those who have a higher level of education and think it is important for their mothers to get married sooner, the effect of education could be very strong: there is both a push from their subjective norm and a push from the rational calculation of potential mates to speed them towards marriage.

I use data from the Chitwan Valley Family Study (CVFS), conducted in the Chitwan Valley of south-central Nepal in 1996, and monthly household registry data continuing forward for 126 months from the time the CVFS data was collected. The Chitwan Valley was a relatively isolated remote place in Nepal and has recently started its modernization process. The CVFS examines social changes and family behavior in 171 neighborhoods including 5,721 individuals. For the analyses presented here, the CVFS sample is limited to 952 individuals between 15 and 24 years old who were not married in 1996 and either got married or remained unmarried during the 126 months of observation period until 2007. I use discrete-time hazard models to examine the monthly risk of getting married:  $\text{Log}(p/1-p) = \beta_0 + \mathbf{X}_k \beta_k$ .

Highest years of schooling and enrollment in school in 1996 and ever having nonfamily work experience are adopted to examine the effects of socioeconomic achievements on the timing of marriage. Various attitudes and subjective social norm towards marriage are measured by the following instruments: 1) 'Girls should marry before menstruation'; 2) 'What do you feel is the ideal age for a man to get married these days', and 'what do you feel is the ideal age for a woman to get married these days'; and, 3) 'How important do you think it is to your mother that you get married soon'. I first examine the effect of each variable while controlling for time, age, gender, caste (ethnicity) and family socioeconomic background (family economic resources, father' highest years of schooling and father ever having nonfamily work experience. Then I include all variables in the full model. Finally, I test the interaction effects between each socioeconomic achievement measure and each attitudinal and subjective norm measure.

Overall, by the end of the 126 months of observation period, about 80 percent of the respondents got married. The average years of education were slightly more than 7 years and about 65 percent of respondents were still at school in 1996. Slightly less than half of the respondents had nonfamily work experience. About 43 percent of respondents had already reached their reported ideal age for marriage during the observation period. Slightly less than one fifth of the respondents agreed that girls should marry before menstruation. Slightly more than half of the respondents thought that it was important for their mothers to get married sooner.

Results from discrete-time hazard models show that both years of schooling and nonfamily work experience increase the risk of marriage and that enrollment in school decreases the risk of marriage which is consistent with most research suggesting enrollment in school is in conflict with marriage formation (Thornton, Axinn & Teachman 1995; Blossfeld & Huinink 1991; Goldscheider & Waite 1986; Yabiku 2006;). It also suggests that more years of schooling

and nonfamily work experience promise a stable and better economic future which makes a potential spouse candidate attractive to the utility-oriented rational individuals looking for spouses. These results provide evidence of a setting where total number of years of school increase the risk of marriage or the likelihood to search for the potential spouse similar to nonfamily work (Bongaarts & Watkins 1996; Ghimire, Axinn, Yabiku & Thornton 2006; Yabiku 2005 & 2006;). It is probably true that either in Western-settings or non Western-settings, enrollment in school is in conflict with family formation while completion of schooling actually facilitates the family formation process. However, the difference is that years of schooling are more extended in most Western-settings than in this study setting in Nepal. Therefore, eventually, completion of education actually increases the rate of marriage. Interestingly, I find that father's years of education, which was likely completed years ago, slows the timing of offspring's marriage. Why is the individual's own education different from his/her father's education on the timing of his/her marriage? It is probably that the individual's education functions more prominently as the economic promise of a better future. However, one's father's education functions more prominently as the ideational factor which cultivates one's personality and attitudes during the childhood.

However, the effects of personal attitudes and subjective norm toward marriage make the decision-making progress regarding the timing of marriage more complicated. The attitude about the ideal age of marriage is not significant; while the attitude about whether girls should marry before menstruation is marginally significant and the subjective norm about whether it is important to one's mother to get married sooner is highly significant. The latter personal attitude about menstruation probably is more closely related to certain social norm/culture in the Nepali society. Therefore, it suggests that perception or perception of pressure from others and culture in general can be more influential on decision-making regarding marriage than one's own attitudes toward marriage in the society of Nepal where universal marriage is still prevalent. Therefore, it seems that the decision-making process regarding the timing of marriage is not a pure, complete, and isolated individual utility assessment. The ideational factors, including attitudes and norms could be involved in this pure economic utility calculation in a complicated way.

Some interesting interaction effects are found in support of the hypothesized conditional mechanisms: both the attitude whether girls should marry before menstruation and the attitude about the ideal age for marriage condition the effect of years of schooling on the timing of marriage. For those who have already reached the ideal age for marriage, years of schooling do not seem to have an effect on the timing of marriage. However, for those who have not reached their ideal age for marriage, years of schooling have a very strong positive effect. The mechanism behind the phenomenon is very puzzling. One possible explanation is that probably those who have already reached their deemed ideal age of marriage are in favor of getting married pretty early. Therefore, due to this personal attitude toward marriage, they would be more motivated to get married sooner by any means, regardless of their years of schooling. Therefore, getting married is prior to searching for attractive spouse candidates by rational calculation which could last a relatively long time. However, the attitude in favor of getting married early probably is influenced by important others. Or, maybe those who have reached their ideal age of marriage face more pressure from culture in the Nepali society. This pressure or influence actually limits their agency, motivation, freedom and time as well to rationally calculate costs and benefits when searching for a spouse. For those who have not reached their ideal age of marriage, they probably have more room to find an attractive spouse partner and

those searching for a suitable spouse also have more opportunities to assess these individuals' attractiveness.

For those who strongly agree that girls should marry before menstruation, years of schooling are negatively associated with the timing of marriage. Among these individuals, they are generally exposed to higher risks of getting married than their counterparts with the same level of education and the disparities are much larger at the low ends of education. In contrast, years of schooling have positive effects for all the others. It is possible those who strongly agree that girls should marry before menstruation are more obedient to traditional culture/social norms on this issue in the Nepali society. The more they agree with the culture/social norms, the less is their agency able to make rational calculations for themselves. Therefore, they are much more likely to get married sooner than others. However, the more years of schooling they have obtained which indicates the better socioeconomic attainments probably give them more agency to make their own decision. However, at the same time, they still hold a strong attitude about the issue. Therefore, their attitudes towards marriage driven by rational calculation indicated by more education and their attitudes towards marriage driven by culture/social norms could be in conflict. Therefore, their attitudes towards marriage are inconsistent and unstable. The more years of schooling they have, probably more conflicts in attitudes would occur and therefore more uncertain are they about the timing of marriage. As the result, the risk of getting married declines as years of schooling increase.

The above results indicate that the decision-making regarding the timing of marriage is very complicated, even after including factors from both economic and ideational dimensions. It probably is true that the economic utility evaluation is a very important component involved in decision-making regarding marriage formation. However, the economic utility calculation is conditional on ideational regulation, involving both personal attitudes and social norm and culture in general. Furthermore, even in the traditional society as Nepal is, personal traits are still prominent in the rational calculation of spouse hunting. However, the process of marriage formation is involved with not only personal calculation but also personal attitudes, subjective norm and culture which condition the personal calculation at the same time. One thing merits further exploration is the mechanism about how education affects the timing of marriage from the perspective of both rational calculation and attitudinal consideration. A longitudinal measure of education would be helpful to sort out the attitudinal changes and help to map the causal relations.

Table 1. Descriptives of Dependent and Independent Variables (N=952, 15<=age<=24)

Variables		Mean/Frequency	Std. Dev
Marriage	yes	79.94%	
	no	20.06%	
<i>Individual Achievement</i>			
Ever had nonfamily work	yes	48.42%	
	no	51.58%	
Enrolled in school in 1996	yes	65.02%	
	no	34.98%	
Highest years of schooling in 1996		7.38	2.98
<i>Personal Attitudes and Subjective Norm</i>			
Reached ideal marriage age (lagged in one month)	yes	43.49%	
	no	56.51%	
Girls should marry before menstruation	Strongly disagree	8.72%	
	Disagree	72.79%	
	Agree	11.34%	
	Strongly agree	7.14%	
Important to one's mother to get married	Not important at all	49.73%	
	Somewhat important	36.44%	
	Very important	13.83%	
<i>Control Variable</i>			
Age		17.73	2.39
Gender	Female	46.32%	
	Male	53.68%	
Caste	High Caste Hindu(ref)	55.15%	
	Low Caste Hindu	8.40%	
	Hill Ttibeto Burmese	12.23%	
	Terai Tibeto Burmese	15.86%	
	Newar	7.88%	
	Others	0.42%	
<i>Family SES</i>			
Family economic resources(component1)		0.39	1.08
Family economic resources(component2)		0.18	1.03
Family economic resources(component3)		0.28	1.20
Father's highest years of education		3.91	4.43
Father ever worked	yes	53.99%	
	no	46.01%	

Table 2. Parameters of socioeconomic and ideational factors on the timing of marriage (N=952, 15<=age<=24,time=126months)

Variables	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5	Model 6
Ever had nonfamily work	0.318***					0.2612**
Highest years of schooling in 1996		0.0339*				0.0431*
Enrolled in school in 1996		-0.3726***				-0.327***
Reached ideal marriage age (lagged in one month)			-0.0302			-0.00575
Girls should marry before menstruation				0.0965+		0.0677
Important to one's mother to get married					0.1804***	0.1663

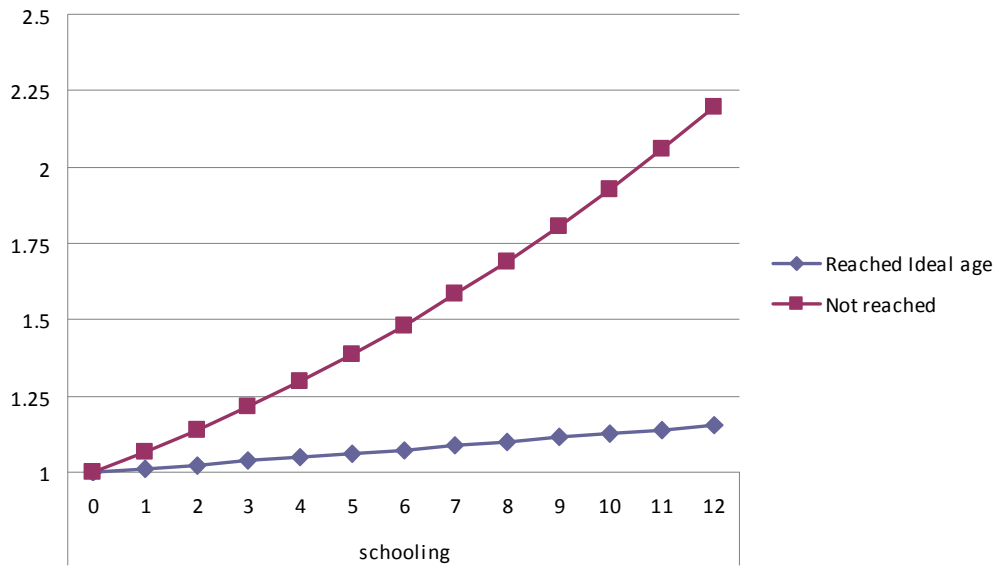
+  $\alpha=.1$ , \*  $\alpha=.05$ , \*\*  $\alpha=.01$  and \*\*\*  $\alpha=.001$ .

Table 3. Interactions between education and various attitudes towards marriage on the timing of marriage

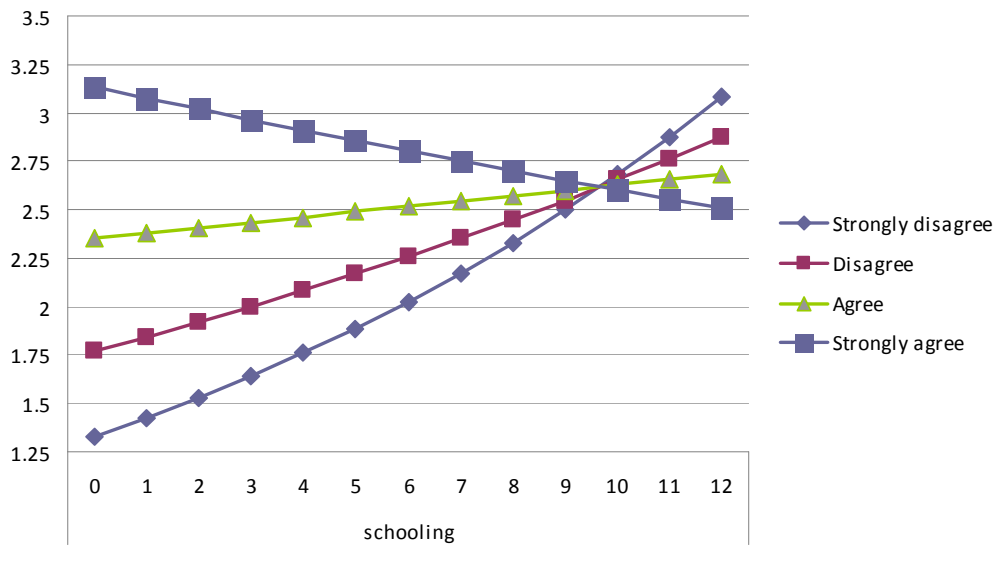
Variables	Model 1	Model 2
Highest years of schooling in 1996	0.0656***	0.0995*
Enrolled in school in 1996	-0.374***	-0.3528***
Reached ideal marriage age (lagged in one month)	0.6322**	
Years of schooling* Reached ideal marriage age	-0.0849***	
Girls should marry before menstruation		0.2855*
Years of schooling* Girls should marry before menstruation		-0.0295+

+  $\alpha=.1$ , \*  $\alpha=.05$ , \*\*  $\alpha=.01$  and \*\*\*  $\alpha=.001$ .

**Figure 1. Odds Ratio of Timing of Marriage by Reaching Ideal Marriage Age and Years of Schooling**



**Figure 2. Odds Ratio of Timing of Marriage by Attitudes towards Menstruation versus Marriage and Years of Schooling**



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