

**When Married Sons Leave Home: Household Fission in an Agricultural Society**

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### **ABSTRACT**

This is a paper about household fission, specifically the action of an adult, married son forming an independent family household apart from his natal home in a heavily patriarchal setting where agriculture has been the primary livelihood and multigenerational households are common. We examine the role of household demographic and economic characteristics, sons' own experiences and attitudes, community context, and environmental quality in shaping the odds of household fission resulting from an adult son and his wife moving out. We follow a cohort of young men from the Chitwan Valley Family Study who were unmarried at the time of the first survey (1996) and married before 2008 (n=456). Once they marry, we estimate the odds that in any given month the adult son will be living away from his natal home with his spouse in an independent household. Results suggest key household, community, environmental, and individual factors influencing household composition in agricultural settings.

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A key characteristic of populations is the distribution of people across households. Worldwide, the number of households has been growing more quickly than population size (Liu et al. 2003). Studies of population impacts on the environment have shown that it is not just the population size or growth that affect the environment, but population distribution in households is also important (Liu, et al. 2005; Moran, Brondizio, and VanWey 2005). Even controlling for overall population growth, increasing numbers of households means a greater depletion of land and resources and a larger amount of waste being produced (Liu et al. 2005). Therefore, it is important to understand the factors behind the world population being increasingly spread across multiple households.

A number of reasons for the exponential growth in numbers of households have been proposed, including higher birth rates meaning families eventually outgrow their households. While land availability and household space are important in determining how many household members a given home can sustain, there are other social forces influencing family living arrangements. A key mechanism for the growth in number of households in agricultural societies is the increasing rate at which married sons establish a nuclear home elsewhere rather than remaining in a multigenerational living situation. Further, households are notoriously difficult to study, because they are dynamic groups constantly in flux, alternating between growth and fission phases (Stevenson 1997). One alternative is to focus on one type of member of the household and study the odds of him establishing his own household and when.

In this paper we examine the factors that are likely related to whether or not a married son and his wife stay living in his natal home in the Chitwan Valley of Nepal, a predominantly patriarchal society where agriculture is the main livelihood. We focus on a comprehensive set of factors related to this form of household fission including household demographic and economic factors, parent

characteristics, the married son's own experiences and attitudes toward parental authority and esteem, community context, and local environmental degradation.

## DATA

We take advantage of a rich set of data collected in the Chitwan Valley of Nepal to test our hypotheses about individual, parental, household, community, and environmental characteristics that might relate to whether and when a married son leaves his natal home to establish a new household. The data are from the Chitwan Valley Family Study, a longitudinal, multi-method study of 151 neighborhoods (naturally occurring clusters of 5-15 households throughout the valley) and all the residents therein from 1996-2008. We focus on the 456 cases of young men who were ages 15-24 and unmarried in 1996 and married by 2008, and use data from the parents and neighbors of these young men as well. We draw from individual-level surveys in 1996 and 2008, monthly demographic registry data collected from 1996 through 2008, and well as household surveys conducted in 1995, 2001, and 2006.

### *Dependent Variable*

Our outcome of interest is the odds of a married son living away from his parents with his wife in each month following his marriage. Therefore our unit of analysis is a person-month following marriage, and for all of these young men we examine all their person-months from the month of marriage (sometime between 1996 and 2008) and the last month under analysis (December 2008). Our method of analysis will be logistic regression, and we will correct for the within-person clustering of observations as well as the clustering of respondents in 151 neighborhoods in the study area.

### *Independent Variables*

We propose that several characteristics of households will be related to the odds that a married son is living away from his natal home with his wife. First, it is important to evaluate if and how intensely a household is involved in agricultural labor. We will create a household-level measure from questions in the most recent household survey (1996, 2001, or 2006) about whether a household farms and how many parcels are farmed. The values for this variable will be “0 = household doesn’t farm,” “1 = farms 1-5 parcels,” and “2 = farms 6 or more parcels.” We will also create measures of the number of livestock a household owns, how long it takes to collect fodder to feed livestock, and whether a household purchases or collects fuelwood. These measures will tap the amount of person-power needed to conduct household tasks. At the household-level, we will also measure demographic composition with a measure of the number of adults in the household and a measure of how many other married sons live in the natal home. As a measure of space available in the home, we include a measure of the number of stories in the home. As measures of household wealth, we include measures of the number of household consumer durables in the house and the quality of materials used to build the house.

Key members of the household that will influence a married son are his parents, so we will include measures of father’s education, a dichotomous indicator of whether a father ever worked outside the home, and an indicator of whether one’s father ever lived apart from his parents.

When it comes to the son himself, there are several characteristics that will likely influence the likelihood that he establishes a separate household after marriage. First, the more education a son achieves, the more likely he is to move outside the agricultural setting to find a non-agricultural job in a city or another country. Education will also likely change his ideas about the ideal living situation following marriage, and increase his desire for independence from his parents. We will include a measure of years of education in the model. Similarly, experience traveling outside the Chitwan Valley and/or living away from home temporarily will expose men to alternate forms of living and

opportunities that take them away from home. We will include a time varying measure of whether a married son has ever traveled and a time-varying measure of ever-lived-away-from-home in our models.

Another form of individual autonomy and the resources to establish an independent household is establishing a personal bank account. We will include a measure of this from the 1996 individual-survey. Media such as movies, television, radio, and newspapers convey ideas and examples of individual autonomy and nuclear family living, so we include an index created from 1996 survey measures of media exposure in our models.

The proposed mechanism of influence for many of the factors mentioned above are that they will alter an individual's attitudes toward family authority and multigenerational living, therefore, we will estimate models including 1996 individual-level measures of (1) the importance of ancestor worship, (2) agreement that men should make all the decisions in a household, (3) agreement that parents should choose children's spouses, (4) agreement that daughter-in-laws should always obey mother-in-laws, (5) agreement that married sons should live with their parents, and (6) agreement that sons should take care of their parents in old age.

To gauge the role of community influence on the behavior of married sons, we take advantage of the clustered nature of the individual-level survey data and aggregate neighbors responses to two attitude questions in the 1996 individual-level survey: (1) agreement that married sons should live with their parents and (2) agreement that sons should take care of their parents in old age. We will use these measures of community norms to estimate the influence of others' attitudes on these young men's behavior.

Our final set of independent variables of interest will be characteristics of the local natural environment. Decisions about whether to keep one's family in the natal home will likely be responsive to local environmental conditions. In the household level surveys conducted in 1996, 2001, and 2006,

key informants were asked to report on perceived crop production, the need for fertilizer, and the water level. These will serve as household indicators of the state of the natural environment.

### *Analytic Plan*

We will present multiple models showing the total relationships between each category of independent variables (household factors, parent characteristics, individual experiences, individual attitudes, community attitudes, and environmental degradation). Then, we will provide a set of nested models to ascertain how independent the factors at all these levels are of each other, suggesting a comprehensive model of forces that influence living situation decisions.

### CONTRIBUTIONS

We expect this paper to contribute to a better understanding of the variety of factors influencing decisions around living arrangements in agricultural settings. With a major event in the lifecycle of households being decisions that married sons make to establish independent households, this paper will clarify which sons are more likely to do this and why. Therefore, these results will contribute to the literatures on household demography—especially household fission, the transition to adulthood in developing countries, and intergenerational families.