



ORIGINAL ARTICLE

# Selection of kin for spouse: Importance of socioeconomic status, reputation and beauty



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## KEYWORDS

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**Abstract Objectives:** Kin marriages are often arranged in societies with many kinship groups and this is believed to be related to poverty and associated lack of education and security. We examined (i) whether choice of kin for spouse was affected by the improved socioeconomic and security conditions, and (ii) compare relative importance of family reputation vs. family wealth and social status and physical appearance in selection of future spouse.

**Methods:** In an electronic survey, 268 Emirati medical students were asked to provide information about their families, biological relation to preferred future spouse and rank the importance of family reputation, family wealth, family social status, and physical appearance in selecting a future spouse. Frequency of kin marriages in two generations was examined within the context of socio-economic development of the nation.

**Results:** Kin marriage rate among parents (36.4%, 79/217) and likely future rate among their children (31.4%, 37/118) were similar ( $p = 0.35$ ). Awareness of harms of inbreeding had a small but statistically significant deterring effect on selecting kin for spouse. The respondents ranked family reputation (72.2%) as most important in comparison to that for the family wealth (5.6%) and social status (9.2%) and spouse physical attractiveness (13.0%). However, family reputation was equally important for the participants with different preferences of kin and non-kin for spouse ( $p = 0.57$ ).

**Conclusions:** The frequency of kin marriages in studied population did not change significantly in the last generation. Knowledge of biological harm of inbreeding has only a small inhibitory effect on choice of kin for spouse. Family reputation was far more important in selection of spouse than family wealth, social status and beauty of spouse, but reputation was uncorrelated with choice of kin for spouse.

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## 1. Introduction

Marriage is traditionally a social contract between a man and a woman, and in most cases between their families. In tribal societies, marriages are often arranged between members of the extended family (kin marriages). Such unions are especially common in North Africa, the Middle East and South Asia (Bittles, 2012). The basis for this widespread inbreeding is not well understood. A common reason for selection of close kin for a spouse is believed to be the poverty and its associated lack of education, often combined with the need for better family protection (Alwan and Modell, 1997; Bittles, 2012; Hussain, 1999; Khlata, 1997). This explanation was recently questioned (Denic et al., 2011).

According to “mate selection theory” choice of a marriage partner is guided by an inherent human inclination to select future spouse that will maximize fitness, i.e., number of surviving children and grandchildren. Many factors like health, wealth, social status, beauty, religion affect choice of spouse and some differ between men and women (Apostolou, 2010b; Buss and Barnes, 1986; Geary et al., 2004). In consanguineously marrying societies, poor are believed to select close kin for spouse more often to preserve economic wealth which historically was positively correlated with family size (Clark et al., 2014). Similarly, in tribal societies, which are less secure in the absence of protection by a central government, selection of close kin for spouse in theory provides better protection and increases fitness (Denic et al., 2010). The association of poverty and insecurity on one side and human consanguinity on the other is implicitly taken for explanations of human inbreeding in many parts of the world. This explanation was criticized on the grounds that poor in many other parts of the world avoid selection of close kin for spouse and enrichment of some tribal societies have not lowered frequency of kin marriages (Denic et al., 2011). Likewise, lack of awareness of biological harms of inbreeding was suggested as another reason for many parents arranging children’s marriages with close kin (Hussain, 1999; Khlata, 1997). However, direct proof is lacking that the absence of knowledge in question affects selection of kin for marriage partner. On the other side, there is a strong association between consanguinity and tribalism (Bittles, 2012). Tribalism and cooperation are recognized as fundamental principles of human social behavior (Nowak and Sigmund, 2005; Wilson, 2013). In general, kin is more cooperative than non-kin and social contracts between kin are more likely to succeed and be productive than those between non-kin. A measure of trust is reputation. Reputation of any individual is based on his/her past history of being (un)cooperative in social contracts; in other words, reputation is a ‘score card’ of past cooperation and defaults in deals made between people. Reputation-based cooperation increases the odds of success of social contracts. In marriage arrangements, family reputation is potentially the best way to guide choice of a future spouse and in-laws especially in societies in which survival of individual more heavily depends on family-support than self-support.

In this study we examined (i) whether choice of kin for spouse was affected by the improved socioeconomic and security conditions, and (ii) compare relative importance of family reputation vs. family wealth and social status and physical appearance in selection of future spouse.

## 2. Material and methods

### 2.1. Ethics approval

The study was approved by the Al Ain Medical District Human Research Ethics Committee, Al Ain, Abu Dhabi, UAE (Protocol No. 12/43).

### 2.2. Study setting and population

The study was conducted in the United Arab Emirates (UAE), which is a confederation of seven emirates. The population is multi-ethnic. About 15% (~one million) are Arab nationals (citizens), most of whom are members of one of an estimated 67 tribes and sub tribes; the rest (85%) of the population are temporary foreign workers (Heard-Bey, 2001). The country’s GDP at \$49,800 per capita is one of the highest in the world and is due to newly acquired oil wealth (CIA, 2013).

### 2.3. Study design

As per 2012 UAE population census, size of national population was 947,997. We estimated that a sample of 260 would provide correct information about families within a 6% margin of error at 95% confidence level. A cohort of 491 national medical students at the College of Medicine and Health Sciences, United Arab Emirates University, Al Ain, Abu Dhabi, UAE, was found to be representative of the population distribution in seven emirates (Table 1). Thus all 491 students in the College were invited to participate in the study. They were informed about the purpose of the survey, the voluntary nature of participation, and the anonymity of their responses. All students use a free-of-charge University email system upon which a commercial online service (<https://www.surveymonkey.com/>) was used for the survey. In an email, they were asked to participate in a survey and complete web-based questionnaire with an estimated completion time of 15 min.

### 2.4. Types of marriages

Marriages of UAE nationals are arranged by parents, and half of them are between second and closer cousins (close kin) (Al-Gazali et al., 1997). In Arab societies, consanguineous marriages can be arranged between cousins, but unions between kin closer than cousin (e.g., uncle and niece) are considered incestuous and illegal (Denic et al., 2010). All intra-tribal marriages by definition are kin marriages and endogamous. However, the distinction between close and distant kin (cousin) is often arbitrary and unclear, and the unions between second and closer cousins are customarily called consanguineous, while those of more distant cousins are referred to as endogamous. However, second cousin unions result in a negligible and often undetectable excess of morbidity and mortality in the offspring, so counting them as consanguineous could be misleading because consanguinity rate is often used as a proxy measure of biological harm from inbreeding (Bittles, 2012). Thus, in the present study second cousin unions were not counted as consanguineous and marriages were classified as follows: (i) close kin (consanguineous) marriages, i.e. those arranged between first cousins, double first cousins, and first

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