

Why Ban Cousin Marriages?

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Never go to a barber shop while you are still mulling over controversial news like, "[Obama invokes gay rights in inaugural address.](#)"

Because your mind may sputter an even more controversial question like, "Why then we smother the discussion on the topic of first cousin marriages?"

And if the question is asked out loud, you may get a response like, "well, you don't have to be an Einstein to know that incestuous relationships lead to diseases in the babies."

This actually happened to me last week. In one succinct sentence, my barber spelled out the three oft repeated reasons to justify banning cousin marriages. That they cause diseases, that they are incestuous, and that banning such marriages is a no brainer. But there is only one problem: all three reasons should be debunked.

I know some of you feel grossed out. But just allow me a few minutes. Don't smother the conversation. Read on please.

And let's be clear. I don't intent to *promote* cousin marriages. But when 25 US states *ban* such marriages in a free society, we ought to at least have a conversation about it.

I believe the "Disease-Incest-Einstein" line of American reasoning to ban such marriages deserves a rebuttal. So let's confront them one by one.

Disease: The risk of birth defects in children born to first cousins is increased from a baseline of 3-4 percent to 4-7 percent [according](#) to the National Society of Genetic Councilors (NSGC). In this modern age, this risk could be mitigated by mandating -- as the State of Maine has done -- pre-marital genetic testing. The NSGC, however, considers the risk to be so insignificant that it does not recommend additional testing or screening.

But wait. It gets complicated. Because the risk of birth defects increases with other scenarios too.

As the maternal age exceeds 35, the incidence of fetal abnormalities creeps up to the 4-7 percent range. Should we also ban such women from having children then?

Hereditary diseases are more prevalent in certain ethnicities: cystic fibrosis in Caucasians, beta thalassemia in Italians, sickle cell in Blacks, phenylketonuria in Irish and Tay-Sachs in Ashkenazi Jews. Why then, allow these groups to freely marry within the same ethnicity?

Incest: As you cross the scientific hurdles, you will be confronted with a mountain of taboo cloaked in words like "gross," "icky," "yucky." But where do such taboo feelings originate from? Not a single verse in the Torah, Bible or Quran -- books revered by three billion followers of the three Abrahamic religions -- prohibits cousin marriage, which were common in Jewish, Christian and Islamic history. The Bible even mentions various accounts of cousin marriages, such as Jacob and Rachel, Milcah and Nahor, and Jacob and Leah, in the book of Genesis. And please don't quote the incest prohibitions listed in Leviticus 18. It never mentions first cousins.

Granted, the fact that something is "allowed" does not always mean that it is socially accepted. So if you still feel grossed out by the thought of marrying your cousin, that's ok. Hold on to your personal feelings; why impose them on others in a free society?

Einstein: This is the ultimate argument made in support of banning cousin marriages. It's so obviously wrong that "You don't have to be an Einstein to figure it out." In the evidence driven societies we have a different word to describe such claims: myth. Myths are best broken by data. The fact that 20 percent of global marriages take place between first cousins and most societies, including Europe and Canada, consider cousin marriages to be legal should give us a pause.

I personally know of Americans -- from different backgrounds -- who have either married their cousin (and kept the fact as hidden as possible) or are in an intimate relationship with one. One could argue whether there is any moral or scientific equivalence between same sex marriages and cousin marriages, but our society's apathy to the latter's "closet" is appalling.

I have learned my lesson. America has no appetite to have a rational conversation over the topic of cousin marriages. And I am certainly not having this discussion in the barber shop again. Because after all the research for this article, I realized that actually, you *have to be* an Einstein in order to believe that there is nothing wrong with cousin marriages. Why?

Because in 1919 Einstein married Elsa Löwenthal -- his first cousin.

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