

Our commitment to care in handling sensitive science

Science is not separate from societal issues. The production and impact of research are fundamentally social processes, and these too warrant scrutiny.

In this issue of *Nature Human Behaviour*, we are publishing an Article by Zietsch et al. (<https://doi.org/10.1038/s41562-021-01168-8>) that uses genetic data from UK Biobank and the Add Health study to examine genomic evidence of an evolutionary basis for same-sex sexual behaviour (SSB).

This is not a trivial research topic. SSB is a human behaviour that huge swathes of the world (71 jurisdictions) consider to be a crime, warranting prosecution and imprisonment. In 11 jurisdictions, individuals who practise SSB—often predominantly individuals who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or other sexual or gender minorities (LGBTQ+)—are sentenced to death, and killed, for their actions. These are stark facts, especially for those of us who are members of the LGBTQ+ community.

In contrast, LGBTQ+ identities, which can include individuals who practise SSB, are celebrated in many societies today. Rainbow flags fly, giving us—members of the LGBTQ+ community and allies—the courage to stand together. Since the first march in 1970, LGBTQ+ Pride parades have filled streets of cities in every continent, in homage to acceptance, community, and an ongoing movement towards equal rights. These marches have their roots in protest, and protest remains their aim, because even in countries with equal civil rights laws, LGBTQ+ identity and behaviour are disproportionately the target of harassment and discrimination.

It is society that dictates whether SSB and LGBTQ+ identity are viewed with pride and joy or with derogation and condemnation, and societies differ widely. With this in mind, can we, and should we, publish research into the evolutionary genetic origins of a behaviour that societies worldwide have such polarized attitudes towards?

This is a question that we asked ourselves as editors when we read the work of Zietsch

et al. It's not an easy question to answer, because ultimately, we cannot dictate how society receives the work that we publish. We wish to publish ethically conducted, robust science that will be of value to science and society. In the case of Zietsch and colleagues' work, we are confident that the research question is of broad interest to the scientific community and beyond, that the work is substantive, and that their findings represent a significant scientific advance, despite numerous limitations that the authors detail in their Article. We also believe more broadly that advancing our understanding of human behavioural diversity can bring great societal benefits.

But science does not stand alone. Our community is not only our readership, but all those who may be impacted by the research that is published in our pages. We recognize that when research involves the participation of, or will likely impact upon, minoritized or stigmatized groups, we as editors may not be best placed to truly comprehend the ramifications of the work that we publish.

In recognition of our own limitations, we consulted with external and internal LGBTQ+ advocacy groups to inform the way in which we handled the Zietsch et al. manuscript. These consultations caused us to pause and reflect, and—we hope—to learn. They shaped the way in which we edited the Article, and they helped us to identify the key issues that we feel are most crucial for our readers to understand the societal context of this work.

In the case of the research presented in the Article by Zietsch et al., we are satisfied that the authors obtained the necessary ethical and data access approvals, and that the use of the UK Biobank and Add Health data is consistent with the overall aims of these biobanks and the broad consent participants provided. However, we also feel that these are topics that merit ongoing debate and scrutiny. Advances in technology open up the possibility of changes to the

consent process that would give participants greater control over the use of their data, which is an aim that we fully support. Science on sensitive topics, no matter how well-intended, can cause harm through misuse. To provide our readership with this wider context, we commissioned two News & Views that accompany the publication of the Article by Zietsch et al. One examines issues surrounding broad consent (<https://doi.org/10.1038/s41562-021-01163-z>), and the other considers the history and future of the ethics of research into polygenic traits, including SSB (<https://doi.org/10.1038/s41562-021-01164-y>). Our intention is for these pieces to inform and contribute to discussion around these important issues.

We recognize that all research on humans begins with those who contribute their data and ends with those who are impacted by its findings. When scientific research involves a sensitive or controversial topic, uses data from marginalized groups or may disproportionately impact marginalized groups, we as a journal commit to handling such work with particular care. We hope that the accompanying opinion pieces on the ethics of this work help to set it in context, and we are grateful for our consultations with LGBTQ+ advocacy groups, which informed our handling of this manuscript. We cannot know the consequences of the work that we publish today, and we recognize that science can be misappropriated, but we do not believe this is reason enough to suppress it, particularly when it also has the potential for positive impact. As editors handling this work we have sought to minimize the potential for harm and maximize the potential for constructive scientific and ethical discussion, and we welcome your feedback on how we have acted in publishing these pieces. □

Published online: 23 August 2021
<https://doi.org/10.1038/s41562-021-01166-w>