

# Scientists self-censor in response to political controversy

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A survey of scientists whose studies became the focus of a public debate about NIH grant funding has found that many of them engaged in self-censorship as a result of the controversy. The study, published in the open access journal *PLoS Medicine*, found that following the criticism of their research, scientists removed politically sensitive language from grant applications and stopped studying certain topics.

These self-censorship tactics were employed despite the fact that all of the criticised studies—most of which investigated sexual behaviour, drug-use, and other HIV-related questions—were defended in an NIH internal review and retained their funding.

Joanna Kempner of Rutgers University in New Jersey surveyed the researchers who were the subject of a debate in the US in July 2003, which began when a Congressional Representative proposed an amendment to rescind five NIH grants after publicly criticising the studies as "less worthy of taxpayer funding" than research into "devastating diseases." The amendment failed to pass but the controversy resulted in the internal review of more than 250 grants by the NIH, which concluded that each study was scientifically sound.

After conducting in-depth interviews with thirty researchers whose funding was reviewed, Kempner surveyed the principal investigators of all the studies. Only a third of the 82 respondents felt they were less likely to receive funding from the NIH in the future, but a majority reported undertaking strategies designed to disguise the most

controversial aspects of their research. Half (51%) said they removed potential "red flag" words from the titles and abstracts of their grant submissions, including the words gay, lesbian, homophobia, anal sex, needle-exchange, and AIDS. Kemper reports that one interviewee said "I do not study sex workers, I study 'women at risk.'"

Almost a quarter of the researchers had either reframed their studies to avoid research on marginalized or stigmatized populations or had chosen to drop studies that were thought to be political sensitive, such as those on sexual orientation, abortion, childhood sexual abuse, and condom use. The survey also found that four of the principal investigators had made career changes and left academia as a result of the controversy.

Joanna Kempner stresses that the controversy also galvanized sections of the research community with 10% of respondents reporting a strengthened commitment to see their research completed, including those who had reported self-censorship practices. She says that the findings are a powerful example of how the political environment can shape what scientists chose not to study.

Citation: Kempner J (2008) The chilling effect: How do researchers react to controversy? PLoS Med 5(11): e222.

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