The Ethics of Genetic Research on Sexual Orientation

In *The Ethics of Genetic Research on Sexual Orientation*, Udo Schüklenk, Edward Stein, Jacinta Kerin, and William Byne argue that genetic research on sexual orientation raises far-reaching ethical concerns as it serves to potentially harm—as manifested in years of history—and perpetuate discrimination against homosexual people, especially in homophobic societies. While their concerns are in alignment with certain ethical theories, they also encounter deficiencies. Nevertheless, their supporting evidence is strong enough to make one question the inherent dangers present in such research.

The article begins with an identification of the various forms of scientific research on sexual orientation. Previously, sexual orientation was investigated through the examination of an individual’s physical features, endocrine system, or her family. Researchers today consider an individual’s physiology in lieu of her physical features, assuming two forms of sexual orientation, each associated with either sex. Much like for this assumption, there is no scientific evidence to support sexual orientation’s connection to hormonal composition. Recent studies suggest a familial component in male homosexuality, but fail to distinguish between between genetic and environmental factors (462). An exception includes Bailey and Pillard’s study of male homosexuality heritability, which examines the concordance rates for identical twins, fraternal twins, non-twin biological brothers, and the adopted brothers of the gay men to conclude that environmental factors significantly contribute to sexual orientation in addition to, although to a lesser extent, genetic factors. In contrast, Dean Hamer’s study relies on statistical data to suggest that genes influence sexual orientation; however, Schüklenk et al. insist that based on its methodology, statistical significance, reliability, and subjectivity, Hamer’s study is flawed (463). They discuss these studies to suggest that genetic research on this topic is likely of
less use than anticipated, though still harmful. The authors proceed to propose three models of the relationship between genes and sexual orientation. The “permissive effect model” claims that sexual orientation results from formative experiences and genes affect the brain structure on which those experiences are inscribed. The “indirect effect model” claims that genes determine the personality traits that shape an individual’s formative experiences and interaction in her environment, and sexual orientation is dependent on these two. The “direct effect model” claims that genes affect the brain structures that result in sexual orientation. Genes do not directly determine (patterns of) behavior and thinking, but there is a correlation between them. Ergo, there is no evidence to support that a particular gene—“gay gene”—structures the brain specifically to have homosexual desires. As current biological evidence is equally relevant to the direct and the indirect model, the authors’ view that genes do not determine—at least not exclusively—an individual’s sexual orientation and that the environment plays a (bigger) role in its determination is reinforced (464).

Schükleken et al. highlight the ethical concerns associated with genetic research on sexual orientation, all of which serve to further discriminate against homosexual people. Historically, many homosexual people have undergone therapies (for instance, genital mutilation) either willingly—due to the homophobic climate—or forcefully. They stress that such research largely occurs in homophobic societies, and strong biases may be present in the researchers’ findings; this results in further harm to homosexual people in such societies, a point of great ethical concern (464). They deny value neutrality in such research as research in general is inevitably a part of (homophobic) social structures, and thus necessarily serves to (intentionally or unintentionally) harm homosexual people. Hence, it is crucial that the motives—stemmed from homophobia—behind the relevant technology’s development be questioned as well. If genetic
screening for sexual orientation becomes a possibility parents may choose to abort fetuses that are deemed prone to homosexuality, similar to when female fetuses are aborted in favor of male fetuses, especially in homophobic societies (465). Such tests may be unreliable since many children’s heterosexuality is independent of such procedures, while others take time to realize their sexual orientation or knowingly hide it. Schüklenk et al. believe that the development and employment of such tests, whether reliable or unreliable, implies that homosexual people are unwanted, thus again reinforcing their ethical concern of discrimination (466).

The authors reject various counterarguments to their ethical concerns—declaring them to be flawed—thus further proclaiming their belief that little good can come from genetic research on sexual orientation. They firstly disprove the claim that whatever is natural or normal is undoubtedly good and should therefore be followed and everything else should be avoided, including homosexuality. Such claims fail to explain why unnatural things are necessarily bad; the precise differences between natural and unnatural; and they conform to the naturalistic fallacy (466). Furthermore, various definitions of normality fail to offer guidelines for ethical evaluations of homosexuality, including the ones defined over statistical figures and by the adaptive purpose something serves under evolution. They move on to stress the importance of offering relevant historical examples to the current debates about genetic research on sexual orientation. Additionally, an unethical research cannot justify a supposedly less harmful research, such as when Simon LeVay defends genetic research on sexual orientation, claiming that it is less harmful than sociological and psychological research (467). In the United States specifically, such research has been defended on the grounds that the lack of will involved in one’s sexual orientation, if scientifically supported, will help relieve discrimination against homosexuals. However, this is an unsound claim, as changeability is not necessarily dependent on genetic
factors and it implies that homosexuality would be wrong if it were a choice (468). Where genetic screening is defended on the grounds that it will seldom be utilized, Schüklenk et al. bring to attention its availability to a large population and fetuses prone to homosexually possibly being aborted. Furthermore, those who argue that the medical profession would not promote genetic screening are mistaken since they assume that it is dependent on medical advice and ignores homophobic medical professionals. It is equally unethical if homosexual people resort to such screening tests, as they may also decide to abort a fetus on the basis of its sexual orientation. Such research cannot be defended even if it promotes knowledge since it may still have negative consequences for homosexual people, especially in homophobic societies (469).

Schüklenk et al. propose that it is necessary to recognize that genetic research on sexual orientation does not discard homophobia and should not be relied upon for the ethical status of homosexual people. Such research should always be defended from a global perspective since the findings will inevitably reach even the most homophobic countries, resulting in severe consequences for homosexual people (470).

Schüklenk et al. offer and debunk various arguments to substantiate their claim that genetic research on sexual orientation raises significant ethical issues. They are not suggesting that such research is unethical in itself; rather, their concerns lie solely in its consequences. Due to the prevalence of homophobia in innumerable societies, the findings of such research will inevitably have biases and even unreliability (for instance, genetic screening). These factors are of ethical concern because they will serve to harm and discriminate against homosexual people—that is, their consequences. As most medical practices at present operate from a utilitarian perspective, it is noteworthy that this view does not consider the greatest good for the greatest number of people in determining such research’s ethicality. Since homosexual people
make up two to four percent of the human population (463) and Schüklenk et al. themselves acknowledge that genetic research on sexual orientation predominantly stems from societal structures (465) and should be conducted from a global perspective (470), act utilitarianism and rule utilitarianism would contend that the happiness of those whose interests are invested in such research takes precedence over the minute number—in comparison—of homosexual possible who could potentially be harmed. After all, the happiness of each person does weigh equally.

In contrast, Kantian Deontology would agree with the authors’ concerns, but on entirely different grounds. Such research acts on the maxim that whenever genetic research on sexual orientation can result in advanced technologies and further knowledge on the subject, it should be conducted. However, such research cannot be universalized, as there will inevitably be cases where the maxim is fulfilled through maltreatment; if there is even one exception to the maxim then the maxim must either be revised or abandoned altogether. Furthermore, such research treats homosexual people—and possibly heterosexual people—as mere means to an end since the resultant technologies and knowledge benefit some people only at the cost of the research subjects. Such research also inevitably violates the autonomy of those subjects, depending on which part of the world the research is being conducted in. Evidently, genetic research on sexual orientation fails to adhere to the three categorical imperatives and is therefore unethical.

Throughout the article, the authors stress the importance of questioning why genetic research on sexual orientation is in demand in the first place. This concern is in accordance with naturalized feminist bioethicists’ interests in the transparency of procedures employed for a decision, the opportunities available for opposing the decisions, and the stability and livability of the resultant affairs. Schüklenk et al. assert that, “the very motivation for seeking the “origin” of homosexuality has its source within social frameworks that are pervasively homophobic” (465).
They suggest that such research is oblivious to opposition as it exclusively takes the voices of homophobic people into consideration, resulting in a harmful environment for homosexual people. They offer the most compelling reasoning for their cause when they claim that resultant technologies (such as, genetic screening) reinstate homophobia by putting homosexual people and fetuses predisposed to homosexuality in jeopardy. Even if homosexual people employ the resultant technologies, it may very well be because of the pressures they face from homophobic societies (469). This case in point illustrates that homophobia and the very development of such technologies go hand in hand. Their concerns that homosexual people may not ever be able to truly consent— independent of all societal compulsion— to such research and that it serves to gratify one group (homophobic people) over the expense of another (homosexual people) are in accordance with Kantian Deontology and naturalized feminist bioethics.

While the authors certainly offer an overwhelming number of arguments in support of their view, they fail to acknowledge one that could have certainly further strengthened their case. Even if genetic research on sexual orientation could be justified— on utilitarian grounds, for instance— it may very well not be worth it since the finances allocated for such research could be directed towards far more beneficial research, such as cancer and heart disease. Furthermore, a few concerns are left unaddressed in their argument. Some people may desire a different sexual orientation plainly due to displeasure and not because of the homophobic culture, similar to people who undergo plastic surgery to be more accepting of themselves. Is it ethically correct to pressure someone into accepting themselves despite their disconsolation? Others may want to change it on grounds of religious beliefs. When the authors state that genetic screening may lead to certain fetuses being aborted, they imply that abortion is ethically wrong, but that issue itself is far more complex. Another underlying assumption is that only homosexual people would want to
change their sexual orientation; however, there may very well be—even if a few—heterosexual people who would desire it. Preventing such research on the basis that it serves to discriminate against homosexual people possibly further discriminates against them as they cannot rely on science for their preferred sexual orientation. Permitting genetic research on sexual orientation may advance freedom and rights for homosexual people by allowing those who want to choose their sexual orientation to remain autonomous agents—a necessary component of ethicality under Kantian Deontology. Utilitarianism and naturalized feminist bioethics may also support it under such circumstances since it is likely to produce greater happiness for a great number of people, and it allows for diversity and rights for the underprivileged, respectively.

Although there are some shortcomings in the article, Schüklenk et al. undeniably offer strong evidence in support of their conclusion that genetic research on sexual orientation ultimately serves to harm and perpetuate discrimination against homosexual people, especially in homophobic societies. It is naïve and impractical to suggest that such research should be conducted under one ethical theory, as the status of homosexual people varies across the globe. Nonetheless, as the authors specify, history has repeatedly manifested the maltreatment of homosexual people while present genetic screening has proven its use towards discriminatory practices. Consequently, like the authors suggest, such research should (preferably) not be conducted in homophobic societies as it violates the autonomy of and serves to harm and discriminate against homosexual people especially.
Bibliography