Original paper

# Social acceptance of body piercing

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**Key words:** body piercing, piercing, social acceptance.

### Abstract

**Introduction:** There is a noticeable increase in the popularity of body piercings among people in early adulthood. The decision-making process related to body piercing does not always take into account social acceptance, and in particular the prospective impact of having unusually placed piercings on the co-creation of a relationship.
**Aim of the research:** The aim of the study was to assess the level of social acceptance of body piercing procedures.
**Material and methods:** The study sample included 500 people aged 20–23 who have body piercing. The control group of 500 people consisted of women who did not have body piercings except for the earlobes and men who did not have any body piercings.
**Results and conclusions:** Respondents' beliefs about the social acceptance of body modifications differed depending on whether they had unusually placed piercings ($\chi^2 = 16.7$; $p = 0.002$). Both in the study group and in the control group, body piercings were more accepted in women than in men. Men with body piercings indicated different piercing places accepted for women than men without piercings. Representatives of the study group were more willing to accept men having earrings than the control group ($\chi^2 = 147.8$; $p < 0.001$). An unusually placed body piercing on a potential partner influenced the decision-making process regarding whether to engage in a relationship ($\chi^2 = 6.4$; $p = 0.011$).

## Introduction

Body piercing procedures include injection interruption, by injection, of the continuity of skin tissues or mucous membranes in order to insert objects of aesthetic value into the resulting wounds [1–3]. Despite the potential health risks, body piercing and other forms of body modification are becoming more and more common. Punctures located in the earlobe are considered conventional and are no longer a source of social controversy [4, 5]. From a medical perspective, placing earrings in the earlobes carries a minimal risk of complications, which is why most often these piercings are not considered in studies dealing with the issue of body piercing [6]. Among the factors influencing the decision to make a tattoo or body piercing, the literature on the subject mentions the need to emphasize one's own individuality, the desire to stand out, as well as the expression of group identification [7]. The individual thus seeks to increase his own sexual attractiveness and signals identification with a particular subculture, thereby strengthening the sense of bond and affiliation [8]. People who undergo body piercing procedures are significantly more likely to abuse psychoactive substances, depressive reactions, risky sexual behaviour, appetite disorders, low self-esteem, and withdrawal thoughts [9]. However, the modifications seem to reflect more of an act of self-care and may even protect the patient from self-harm in some clinical cases. As noted by Walsh [10], a distinction must be made between self-piercing and piercing in a specialised professional practice. This procedure performed one's own in a certain group of people may act as a discharge of negative mental tension, but for most of them these are well thought out, planned actions aimed at increasing attractiveness.

## Aim of the research

The aim of the study was to assess the level of social acceptance of body piercing procedures.

## Material and methods

The study used an original survey questionnaire consisting of closed and semi-open questions. The questions included in the survey concerned sociodemographic variables, beliefs about body piercings and social acceptance of having piercings, taking into account the gender of the wearer. The study included 1000 respondents aged 20–23 years. Due to the adopted criteria for inclusion in the group, purposive sampling was used in the research. The study group consisted of 500 individuals who had undergone ear piercing and had punctures at more than one site, with both earlobes considered to be a single puncture site in women, and one earlobe at more than

one site considered to be multiple punctures, and such individuals were included in the study group. For men, any puncture was included in the study group. The equal control group consisted of women who had no earrings except for the earlobes and men who had no earrings. The research was conducted in the Świętokrzyskie Voivodeship in the city of Kielce and Ostrowiec Świętokrzyski. Participation in the research was voluntary, combined with the provision of anonymity in accordance with the Personal Data Protection Act of 29.08.1997 (Journal of Laws No. 133, item 883). The consent of the bioethics committee no. 7/2013 was obtained to carry out the above research.

### Statistical analysis

The data were analysed by statistical description supported by graphical presentation. The $\chi^2$ test was used to determine differences between the study and control groups. Rejection of the null hypothesis or lack of the basis to reject the null hypothesis was the result of comparison of value $\alpha$ with $p$. The data were collected in Microsoft Excel, in which some of the analyses and graphs were created. The rest were created with use of Statistica by StatSoft ver. 13.1.

## Results

Women are far more likely to undergo body piercing procedures than men ($\chi^2 = 93.7$; $p < 0.001$). Only 2.8% of men had body piercings. Among the subjects classified to the study group, 5.4% of the subjects declared one atypically located earring, 2.0% of the respondents – 2 earrings, 41.3% of the subjects – 3 earrings, 27% – 4 earrings, 13.6% – 5 earrings, 5.2% – 6 earrings, 5.6% – 7 or more earrings. The highest recorded number of punctures was 33. Body piercing placed in the earlobe in 91.2% of respondents, in the cartilage of the auricle – in 46.2% of respondents, in the navel – in 26.4% of respondents, in the tongue – in 8.6% of respondents, in the nose – in 7.2% of respondents, in the eyebrow – in 4.4% of respondents, in the lips – in 2.6% of respondents, in the intimate areas – in 1.8% of respondents, and in the chin – in 0.8% of respondents.

### Beliefs about the social reception of body piercing

Figure 1 shows the respondents' opinions on the degree of social acceptance of body piercings. There were statistically significant intergroup differences in beliefs about the social perception of body piercing ($\chi^2 = 16.7$; $p = 0.002$). Respondents' views differed depending on whether they were wearers of unusually placed earrings themselves. In the control group, 14% of respondents believed that displaying to earrings may contribute to adverse public reactions. Among people who had body piercings in unusual places,

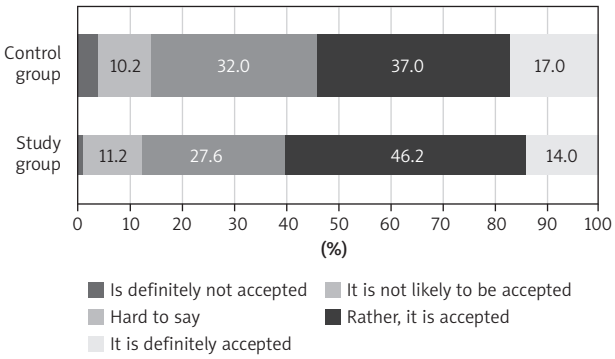


**Figure 1**. Respondents' beliefs about the degree of social acceptance of body piercing wearers ($n_p = 500$, $n_k = 500$, $\chi^2 = 16.7$; $p = 0.002$)

12.2% of respondents shared this view. According to 54% of the control group and 60% of the respondents, the public did not express its disapproval of earrings. The above results may suggest that people who have body piercings placed in unusual locations actually encounter ostracism less often than is commonly assumed, or that they are not always aware of the social perception of the body modifications made.

Not all piercing sites for women have proven to be acceptable both to women themselves and to men, who have also opted for such body modifications. Figure 2 shows the opinions of respondents with piercings regarding accepted piercing sites in women. According to women who decided to have body piercings, the least suitable location of the earring in a woman turned out to be intimate areas (13.6%), chin (23%), lip (31.0%) and eyebrow (35.6%). It was shown that women's opinions on the location of certain piercings were not shared by men with body piercings. More than 60% of women were of the opinion that the nose was an attractive piercing site, with only just over 7% of men agreeing ($\chi^2 = 11.6$; $p < 0.001$). The piercing sites less frequently preferred by women were found to be even more unattractive for men (intimate sites: $\chi^2 = 91.6$; $p < 0.001$, chin: $\chi^2 = 78.6$; $p < 0.001$, lips: $\chi^2 = 78.\ 1$; $p < 0.001$, eyebrow arch: $\chi^2 = 74.1$; $p < 0.001$). The findings suggest that piercings considered attractive by women are not so perceived by men, even those who have body piercing themselves.

Respondents in the control group, when responding about the number of piercings accepted in women, 70.8% indicated only one site ($\chi^2 = 2832$; $p < 0.001$). Figure 3 presents the opinions of respondents who do not have body piercing, on the sites of piercings accepted in women. Among women in the control group, there were lower values for acceptance of each possible piercing site compared to those in the study group. These women were most disapproving of piercings of the intimate areas, chin and lips. Female eyebrow arch piercing was significantly more appreciated by

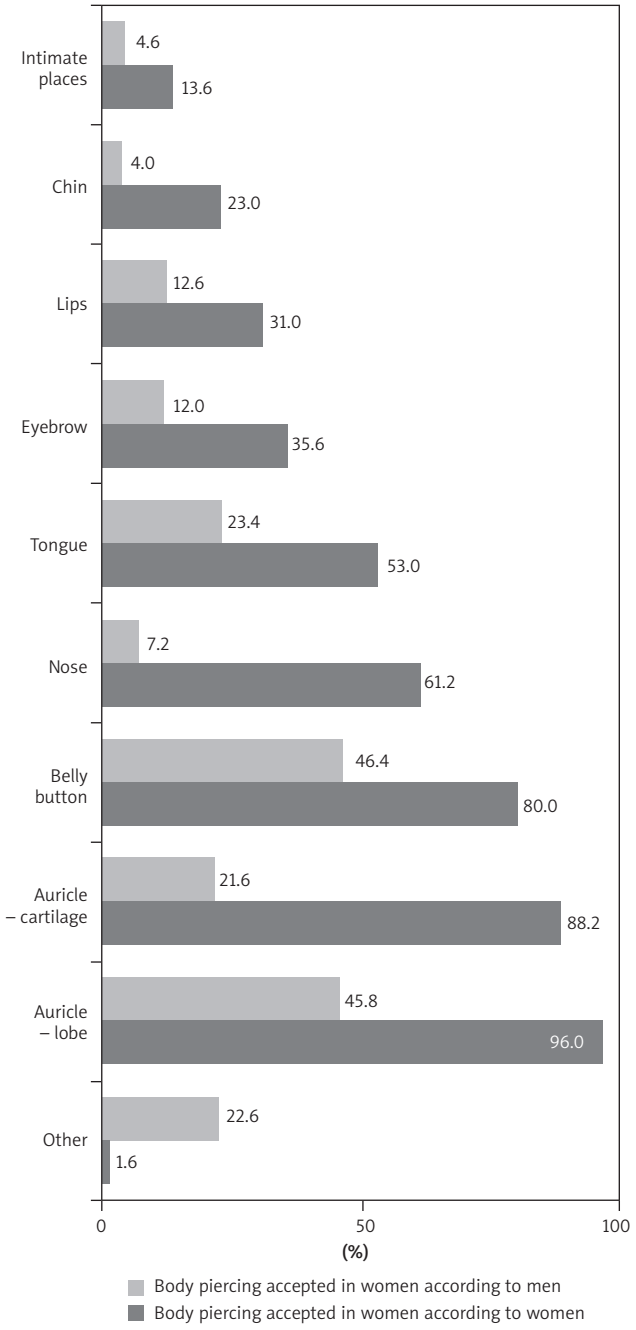


**Figure 2**. The location of the punctures that respondents might accept in women. Responses from people using body piercing procedures ($n_p$ = 500)

men (39.8%) than by women (27.6%) in the control group ($\chi^2$ = 75.8; $p$ < 0.001). Acceptance of the navel as a puncture site was significantly lower in the control group (4.4%) than in the study group (Figure 2: 46.4%). The opposite relationship was observed for the eyebrow arch, with men from the control group (39.8%) more likely to accept body piercings in women than men from the study group (12%).

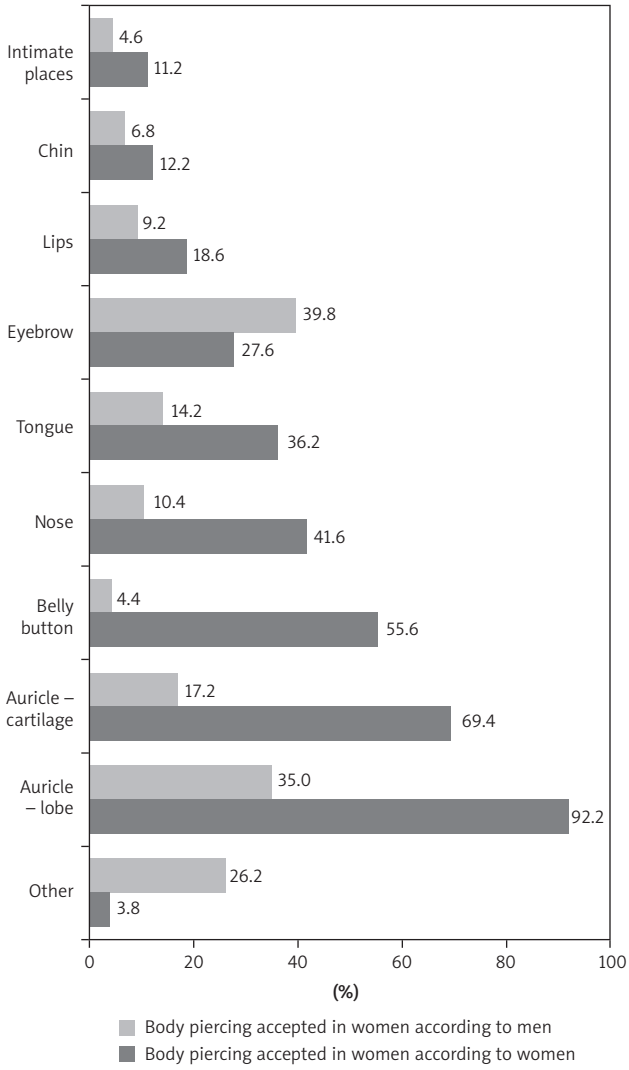


**Figure 3**. The location of the punctures that respondents might accept in women. Responses from people who do not use body piercing procedures ($n_k$ = 500)

Earrings in men were more likely to be accepted by representatives of the study group than by those of the control group ($\chi^2$ = 147.8; $p$ < 0.001), with the acceptance level of representatives of both groups decreasing steadily as the number of earrings increased. In the control group, 24.6% of respondents said that any earring in a man was unacceptable to them, while 48.2% of respondents would be willing to accept only one earring. In the study group, none of the respondents showed total intolerance for body piercing in men, while 59.6% of the respondents allowed only one piercing, and 18.2% tolerated two piercings (Figure 4).

### Body piercing and partnerships

Having a body piercing turned out to be a factor influencing the desire to establish a partner relation-

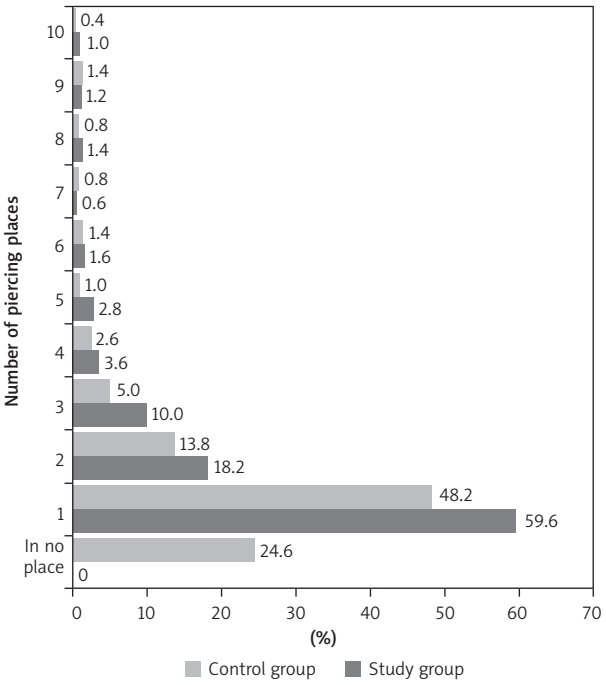


**Figure 4**. Acceptable number of earrings in men ($n_p$ = 500, $n_k$ = 500, $\chi^2$ = 147.8; $p$ < 0.001)

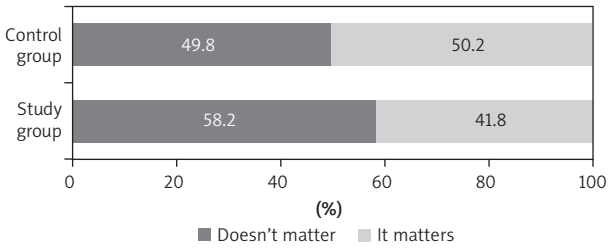


**Figure 5**. The impact of having a body piercing by a potential partner on the decision about the intention to engage in a relationship ($n_p$ = 500, $n_k$ = 500, $\chi^2$ = 6.8; $p$ = 0.009)

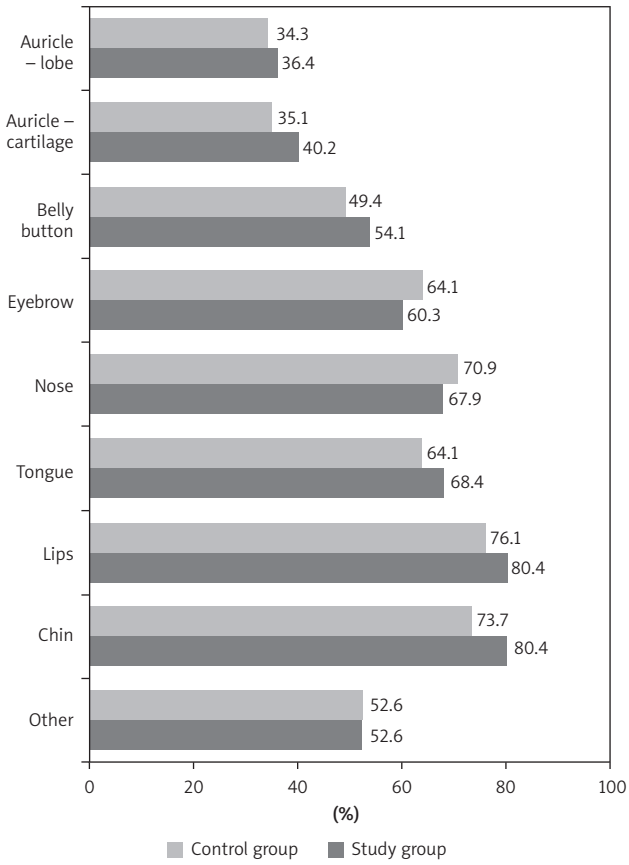


**Figure 6**. Puncture sites that are an obstacle to establishing a partner relationship ($n_p$ = 209, $n_k$ = 251)

ship with a potential candidate, both for the control group and for the study group, whereas respondents from the study group showed greater tolerance in this area ($\chi^2$ = 6.8; $p$ = 0.009). Nearly 42% of people who wear earrings in unusual places would consider a potential partner's earring to be an obstacle to a relationship (Figure 5).

Regardless of whether the respondents themselves had a body piercing or not, they pointed at similar rates to puncture sites that would disqualify a potential partner. Having or not earrings did not differ in the respondents' views on this issue; there were no statistically significant differences between the groups. Among the identified obstacles to establishing a partner relationship, respondents from the control group more often replaced the earring in the nose and in the eyebrow arch, while in the study group – the chin and the lips (Figure 6).

## Discussion

In a 1999 study of 766 students in the United States, Greif *et al*. [11] found that 63% of the respondents had some form of body piercing. The authors showed that people who decided to have body piercings were more impulsive in making decisions and significantly more often observed various health problems in them [6, 12–14]. A study by Tiggemann and Hopkins [15] involving 80 respondents revealed that individuals with piercings in places other than the auricles and those who had no piercings at all scored significantly higher on the need for uniqueness compared to individuals with conventional piercings placed in the auricles. Van Hoover *et al*. [3] believe that the contemporary importance given to body piercings is related to the need to fit in with current fashion trends. Some authors postulate that the motivating factors to perform body piercing include self-harm [16, 17]. Then the main reason for the modification of the body is the desire to experience pain [18, 19].

Schnabl *et al*. [20] in a study of 62 people with lip or tongue piercings, focused on determining their personality traits and selected aspects of their body

perception. Analyses of the results obtained revealed that although the psychological characteristics of those with oral piercings were not significantly different from those of the average population, individuals with multiple piercings were characterized by a significantly lower sense of attractiveness, lower self-confidence, and experienced greater anxiety about their bodies than those with a single piercing ($p < 0.05$). Body modification can serve to maintain the idea of exercising control over oneself, one's body and the environment, symbolically create a new identity [21], as well as to inform the environment about the social status of the individual [16]. The analysis of Greif *et al*.'s studies showed that the leading motive for piercing the body is the desire to express one's self (84% of respondents) or image and aesthetic considerations (21% of respondents) [11].

The popularity of body modification procedures has changed over the years, as evidenced by the experiment conducted by Walsh [10]. In the late 1980s, he presented a series of slides depicting tattoos and earrings placed on the body. As many as 80–90% of people invited to participate in the experiment considered these body modifications to be self-harm [22]. The same slides presented in the years 2000–2010 were considered as self-harm by only 5–10% of viewers, which may indicate a significant change in social perception, as well as a growing prevalence of this phenomenon. Body piercing procedures are much more popular among women, and the most common piercing site is the earlobes. Men rarely choose such treatments and usually have one earring each. A French study of 5,000 respondents by Kluger *et al*. [23] found that piercings of the outer ear were the most popular (42%). Less frequent sites were the navel (24%), tongue (15%) and nose (11%).

Women more often opted for body piercing of the navel and nose, while men preferred the eyebrow arch. Differences were also noted in the motivation, which guided the decision to have a puncture – women appreciated aesthetic values, striving to beautify their own body, while men wanted to emphasize their individuality and accentuate sexuality. A study conducted by Natanson at the University of Columbia showed that 36% of women and 26% of men wore at least one earring located outside the auricle or a tattoo. On the other hand, a study conducted in Germany on a population of 2,043 people aged 14–44 years revealed that 6.8% of respondents had a puncture at a site other than the auricle. This form of body modification was found to be most popular among people aged 14 to 24 (38.0%). Displaying both piercings and tattoos was reported by 41.0% of women and 27.0% of men [20]. Studies conducted in California, New York and Paris showed that in the late 1990s, a total of 30,000 body piercings were performed in those cities in 1 year [24]. Despite the increasing popularity of body piercing, not all earring wearers declare their satisfaction with their decision referring to it from the perspective of time – this applies to both people who decided to pierce unusual places and those who have socially accepted earrings in the earlobes. According to the results of previous studies [25], among people with body piercings in unusual locations, 13.8% would not perform some piercings, while 26.8% would not choose any of the piercings. In the literature of the subject there are few reports on the impact of body piercing on personal life. Few researchers have looked for links between body piercing and sexual activity. A study by Skegg *et al*. [26] of 183 respondents with earrings in locations other than the auricle showed that women had five or more sexual partners over the past year. There was no association between body piercing and sexual activity in men. Similar correlations between sexual activity and body piercing have also been suggested by Koch *et al*. [27]. A study revealed significantly higher sexual activity among women wearing earrings compared to those without earrings. There were no statistically significant associations in this regard among men. The purpose of the study was to examine social beliefs affecting the degree of acceptance of body piercing, and to show whether having piercings can affect the course of selection of potential romantic partners. It has been shown that individuals with body piercings are convinced that they are more socially tolerant among those who do not have piercings than is actually the case ($\chi^2 = 16.7$; $p = 0.002$). Respondents' beliefs about acceptable piercing sites in women were found to be divergent, depending on whether they belonged to the study or control group. Significant inconsistency in opinions was also noted in terms of the group of body piercing wearers themselves – piercing sites that women perceived as attractive in other women were not considered attractive by male piercers (eyebrow arch: $\chi^2 = 74.1$; $p < 0.001$, nose: $\chi^2 = 11.6$; $p < 0.001$, tongue: $\chi^2 = 71.5$; $p < 0.001$). Having earrings in men was also perceived differently by the representatives of the study group and the control group ($\chi^2 = 147.8$; $p < 0.001$). Nearly 60% of those in the study group were willing to accept one earring in a man, and nearly 1 in 5 respondents were even willing to accept two, while among those without body piercings, acceptance was significantly lower – one in four respondents felt that a man should not have any earring, while less than half of respondents allowed just one earring.

According to the respondents, showing the earring in an unusual place can significantly reduce the chances of establishing a relationship. People who had the earrings themselves showed greater tolerance ($\chi^2 = 6.8$; $p = 0.009$), but more than 40% of them could reject a potential partner because of the earring. Respondents considered the nose, eyebrow arch, chin and lips to be the most depreciating puncture sites. Out of the total surveyed sample of 1,000 people, an atypically placed body piercing would discourage 46% of respondents from establishing a closer relationship, while for 54% of respondents it would have no im-

pact on the decision-making process. In the group of people with earrings in unusual places, almost 42% of them would consider the earring of a potential partner as an obstacle to forming a relationship.

## Conclusions

The degree of social acceptance of body piercing procedures depends on the gender of the wearer, as well as on the number and location of the earrings. Beliefs about the social acceptance of unusually placed earrings depend on whether the person making the assessment has such an earring themselves. People who have unusual body piercings show greater tolerance for earrings in women than in men. Body piercing procedures affect personal life by limiting the group of potential life partners.

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## Ethical approval

Approval number: 7/2013.

## Conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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