

## **Understanding Australians' Perceptions Of Controversial Scientific Research**

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### **Abstract**

This research examines perceptions of stem cell research among a representative sample of 1013 Australians and five focus groups. The results suggest that the majority of Australians were comfortable with the research using adult cells, but were not comfortable with scientists using cells created by cloning. The sample was however divided in relation to the use of embryonic stem cells. The use of structural equation modelling found that this division was strongly associated with the level of social trust in the scientific organisations conducting the research via anti-intellectual beliefs and the perceived value of science. Higher comfort was demonstrated among those with higher levels of social trust because of a commitment to the intellectual freedom of science and a perception that the products of science are valuable. Religious individuals were less likely to support stem cell research due to stronger anti-intellectual beliefs, but demonstrated similar levels of social trust and beliefs in the value of science to the non-religious. Finally, among both religious and non-religious groups, support for stem cell research was found to be much less likely if conducted in private compared to publicly funded organisations. The implications of the results for the perception of science are discussed, as well as the consequences for social trust if the increasing move towards tying scientific enquiry to private rather than public interests continues.

**Key Words:** stem cell research, social trust, anti-intellectualism, values