

ETHICS & MEDICS

A Commentary of The National Catholic Bioethics Center on Health Care and the Life Sciences

SAME-SEX PARENTING AND SOUND SCIENCE

The science used to cast homosexual parenting in a neutral or even positive light has proved unsound. Two new studies, published in *Social Science Research*, challenge a position that is summarized in the words of the American Psychological Association's 2005 brief on same-sex parenting:

There is no evidence to suggest that lesbian women or gay men are unfit to be parents or that psychosocial development among children of lesbian women or gay men is compromised relative to that among offspring of heterosexual parents. Not a single study has found children of lesbian or gay parents to be disadvantaged in any significant respect relative to children of heterosexual parents. Indeed, the evidence to date suggests that home environments provided by lesbian and gay parents are as likely as those provided by heterosexual parents to support and enable children's psychosocial growth.¹

New Studies

The first study, authored by Mark Regnerus, a sociologist at the University of Texas at Austin, has taken the majority of the limelight.² His New Family Structures Study (NFSS) boasts data from a significantly larger, randomized, heterogeneous, and nationally representative sample (15,058 adults were screened, and 2,988 between the ages of 18 and 39 completed full surveys) with more adequate comparison groups than past studies. The outcomes were reported by adult subjects themselves, rather than by parents, and included not only "soft" indicators, such as emotional, relational, or psychological state, but also more objective matters of social concern.³

While proponents of the homosexual political agenda may fear that "the study, which found inferior economic, educational, social, and psychological outcomes among children of gay parents, comes across as evidence that homosexuals are unfit to raise kids,"⁴ Regnerus himself draws no conclusions about causal relationships, recognizes the major limits of his study, acknowledges confounding variables,⁵ and warns "that one should not infer from these findings alone answers to challenging contemporary ethical and legal issues."⁶ His conclusions can be summarized in two simple points: (1) the claim that

there are no differences in child development outcomes has no factual support, and (2) children are most likely to be successful as adults if their entire childhood is spent with their married biological parents, particularly if they stay married.⁷

The second study, by Loren Marks of Louisiana State University, is an analysis of fifty-nine major same-sex parenting studies.⁸ It shows how not even one study cited by the American Psychological Association in its 2005 brief meets the statistical standards necessary to prove the "null hypothesis"—the conclusion that there are no significant differences—between the effects on children of same-sex parenting versus married, biological, heterosexual parenting. The critiques include homogeneous sampling, missing or inadequate comparison groups, contradictory data, parent reporting, convenience sampling, and failure to meet the APA's urged statistical power standards.⁹ In short, as Marks puts it, "not a single study, including the few that reported [statistical] power, meets the standards needed to detect a small effect size,"¹⁰ meaning that all the studies are likely guilty of a statistical Type II error, which is "incorrectly concluding that there is no difference between groups."¹¹

The APA posted a response that fails to address the implication that its conclusions, as mentioned in the 2005 brief, are overblown and empirically unwarranted.¹² Based on their true statement that "there is no scientific evidence that parenting effectiveness is related to parental sexual orientation," an illogical non sequitur is passed off as true: "lesbian and gay parents are as likely as heterosexual parents to provide supportive and healthy environments for their children." In scientific reasoning, a lack of evidence for a link between orientation and parenting effectiveness does not lead to any conclusion one way or the other—unless, that is, one leaps from the realm of science into agenda-driven politics.

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Parenting Implications

The two studies, taken together, emphasize two points. The first is that more reliable and statistically powerful studies are still necessary to draw meaningful scientific conclusions about the small-size effects of same-sex parenting versus other forms of parenting. In fact, using Marks's analysis, even Regnerus fails to avoid the Type II error regarding same-sex groups: at least 393 subjects are necessary,¹³ yet the NFSS found only 248 respondents who reported a parent having had a same-sex relationship (175 lesbian mothers and 73 gay fathers). Nonetheless, the improved study is a dramatic step in the right direction. As an editorial in *Deseret News* aptly notes, "Sound science demands that findings be testable, replicable and falsifiable. The NFSS appears to provide researchers a framework for that kind of sound rigorous social science with regard to the vital issue of family structure and child well-being."¹⁴ Despite the recognized imperfections of the Regnerus study, it can surely be said, in the words of Patrick Fagan of the Family Research Council, that "if you can't draw conclusions from it, there's not a snowball's chance in hell you can draw conclusions from those other [same-sex parenting] studies."¹⁵ Douglas Allen, a Canadian economist and expert on same-sex marriage studies, agrees: "If the Regnerus study is to be thrown out, then practically everything else in the field has to go with it."¹⁶

The second point is an affirmation of the traditional family structure. In the words of Charles Cooke of the *National Review Online*, "the major takeaway from the report is less an indictment that same-sex households are a *negative* thing and more an affirmation that intact, biological households are a *positive* thing."¹⁷ Ross Douthat of the *New York Times*, summarizing the abundant and sound science of recent decades regarding heterosexual family situations, recalls that "no other parental arrangement, from single motherhood to cohabitation to shared custody, affords as many social, economic and emotional advantages as being raised by two biological parents joined in a lifelong commitment."¹⁸ This confirms "what biology, sociology, custom and religion have long indicated: family structure counts and the intact married biological family is the healthiest structure for nurturing the next generation."¹⁹ As Regnerus himself concludes, "the NFSS clearly reveals that children appear most apt to succeed well as adults—on multiple counts across a variety of domains—when they spend their entire childhood with their married mother and father, and especially when the parents remain married."²⁰

In sum, the existing science does not provide definitive answers and solid empirical support specifically for or against same-sex parenting. Though the conclusions from existing studies are often overblown and tailored to political and legal agendas, any attempt to do so cannot accurately claim to be supported by sound science. Regnerus and Marks have opened the doors to greater rigor, but social science researchers expect it will

take years—and perhaps decades—before the effect of same-sex parenting and other family structure changes becomes apparent.²¹ In the meantime, the debate shall go forward based on principles—so let reason, seeking to understand the human person and his true good, take to the field on both sides, ever wary of the manipulative use of scientific data to support ideological claims that the research available "is accepted beyond serious debate" in the scientific community.²²

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¹ American Psychological Association, *Lesbian and Gay Parenting* (Washington, DC: APA, 2005), available at <http://www.apa.org/pi/lgbt/resources/parenting.aspx>.

² Mark Regnerus, "How Different Are the Adult Children of Parents Who Have Same-Sex Relationships? Findings from the New Family Structures Study," *Social Science Research* 41 (2012): 752–770.

³ *Ibid.*, Table 1, 759–760.

⁴ William Saletan, "How Lousy Gay Parenthood Makes a Case for Gay Marriage," *Slate*, June 11, 2012.

⁵ Regnerus, "How Different," 755–756, 766.

⁶ "Family Structure Counts," editorial, *Deseret News*, June 9, 2012, <http://www.deseretnews.com/article/765581791/Editorial-Family-structure-counts.html?pg=all>.

⁷ See Regnerus, "How Different," 766.

⁸ Loren Marks, "Same-Sex Parenting and Children's Outcomes: A Closer Examination of the American Psychological Association's Brief on Lesbian and Gay Parenting," *Social Science Research* 41 (2012): 735–751.

⁹ See *Ibid.*, 735–745.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 747.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 745. This assumes the effect size is small, which is the typical case in social science research since "detecting a novel 'large effect' from a single variable (whether it is divorce, remarriage, or same-sex parenting) is a comparatively rare occurrence" (*Ibid.*, note 84).

¹² American Psychological Association, "APA on Children Raised by Gay and Lesbian Parents," June 11, 2012, <http://www.apa.org/news/press/response/gay-parents.aspx>.

¹³ See Marks, "Same-Sex Parenting," 747, citing Robert Lerner and Althea K. Nagai, *No Basis: What the Studies Don't Tell Us about Same-Sex Parenting* (Washington, DC: Marriage Law Project, 2001).

¹⁴ "Family Structure Counts."

¹⁵ Wetzstein, "Study Suggests."

¹⁶ Douglas W. Allen, "The Regnerus Debate," *National Review Online*, June 14, 2012.

¹⁷ Charles C. W. Cooke, "Is Gay Parenting Bad for the Kids?" *National Review Online*, June 10, 2012, original emphases.

¹⁸ Ross Douthat, "Gay Parents and the Marriages Debate," *New York Times*, June 11, 2012.

¹⁹ "Family Structure Counts."

²⁰ Regnerus, "How Different," 766.

²¹ Lois M. Collins, "Studies Challenge Widely Held Assumptions about Same-Sex Parenting," *Deseret News*, June 9, 2012.

²² Yet that is exactly what the U.S. District Court Ninth Circuit did in the decision *Perry v. Schwarzenegger*, C 09-2292 VRW (January 11, 2010), <https://ecf.cand.uscourts.gov/cand/09cv2292/files/09cv2292-ORDER.pdf>.

CHALLENGING THE NO DIFFERENCE MYTH

Two studies, by Mark Regnerus and by Loren Marks, published in *Social Science Review* have generated considerable controversy.¹ The studies challenged an accepted orthodoxy, namely, that there is no difference between children raised by persons involved in same-sex relationships and those raised by heterosexual parents.

The Regnerus study compared young adults from seven different family structures: intact biological family (mother and father who remain married for eighteen years), mother and father who are cohabitating, mother involved in a same-sex relationship, father involved in a same-sex relationship, adopted parents, single mothers, and ex-spouses sharing custody. The study found that in the majority of areas measured, young adults raised in an intact biological families had better outcomes than any of the other groups. This should not be surprising. According to sociologist David Popenoe, "in three decades of work as a social scientist, I know of few other bodies of data in which the weight of evidence is so decisively on one side of the issue: on the whole, for children, two parent families are preferable to single-parent and stepfamilies."² Yet, some have expressed surprise and even disappointment.

William Saletan criticized Regnerus for focusing only on young adults born between 1971 and 1994, arguing that most of the subjects were born from a heterosexual union that occurred before the lesbian or gay parent "came out," whereas today, persons with same-sex attraction are more likely to "come out" early, enter into committed same-sex relationships, and acquire children through adoption, donor insemination, or surrogate motherhood.³ According to Saletan, Regnerus should have compared adults raised for their entire childhood by a same-sex couple to adults raised in an intact biological family for their entire childhood. Regnerus responded that he could not do this because in the initial survey of 15,025 persons, he found only two young adults who fit into that category.⁴

Saletan admitted that "kids tend to do best when they grow up with their biological, married parents" but argued that stability of the relationship should be taken into consideration and that "same-sex couples who replicate this stability produce essentially the same outcomes as, say, a straight couple that uses egg or sperm donation to overcome one partner's infertility."⁵ He also suggested that children of same-sex couples could have equal or even better outcomes than children from intact biological families because they are all "planned."

Strong Counter-evidence

There are three obvious problems with these theories. First, a study by Elizabeth Marquardt, Norval Glenn, and Karen Clark titled, *My Daddy's Name Is Donor*, found that

children raised by their biological married parents had better outcomes as young adults than those conceived by donor insemination. In particular, children by donor insemination who are living with lesbian mothers were more likely to report problems with substance abuse.⁶ Second, there is no evidence that same-sex couples can replicate the stability of comparable intact biological families. Nanette Gartrell and colleagues conducted a longitudinal study of predominantly well-educated, white, middle- or upper-class lesbians who conceived by donor insemination and found that 56 percent of couples had separated by the time their child reached age ten.⁷ Third, same-sex couples who "plan" pregnancies intentionally deprive their child of a father or mother. Marquardt, Glenn, and Clark note this in their study: "Donor conceived children know that the parents raising them are also the ones who intentionally denied them a relationship with at least one their biological parents. The pain they might feel was caused not by some distant birth parent who gave them up, but by the parent who cares for them every day."⁸

Many "planned" children conceived through donor insemination are speaking out against what was "planned" for them. In a comment posted on donor conceived stories on The Anonymous Us Web site, one person writes, "How could the doctors, sworn to 'first do no harm' create a system where I now face pain and loss of my own identity and heritage?" Children conceived through donor insemination are often made to feel that their desires are unacceptable: "I have to be so careful not to upset anyone about it, when really, it's me that's upset."⁹

Children conceived by donor insemination are now organizing and demanding information about their biological fathers. In response, several countries have outlawed anonymous sperm donation and allow children to contact the donor at age eighteen.¹⁰ However, a number of jurisdictions are allowing the partner of a mother who has conceived by donor insemination to put her name in the place on the birth certificate designated for the father.¹¹

Fabricating Reality

Josephine Quintavalle, founder of Comment on Reproductive Ethics (CORE), believes that "birth certificates should reflect how a baby is generated. . . . As much as you try to play around with the terminology, the biology reflects what has happened and one day the child will ask about the father."¹² According to ethicist Margaret Somerville, "the 'best interests' of the child should prevail, not the preferences of adults which would contravene those interests. In other words, we need child-centred decision-making, not adult-centred decision-making."¹³

Same-sex couples who acquire children are understandably loath to admit that their choice to parent may hurt their child. Thus they perpetrate the myth that two mommies or two daddies are just the same, or even better, than a mother and father, and they deny the child's desire for a parent of the other sex.

Even when the donor is known, the child conceived by donor insemination may experience loss. A 2004 *New York Times* article featured the story of Ry, a girl who was



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conceived using the sperm of a homosexual man known to her “mothers.” The man had a positive relationship with Ry, and Ry relates that she saw him as “an icon of a man.” When Ry was nine years old, the man found that he had AIDS and asked permission to take Ry to meet his parents. Ry’s “mothers” refused, and he brought the case to court. But when he saw that litigation was destroying his relationship with Ry, he withdrew. He has since died. Ry speaks of him with a wistful sadness, except when in the presence of her “mothers,” when she becomes “almost uncharacteristically tough.”¹⁴

If there is no way for a child to be raised by his biological parents, then the adults involved have a duty to try to provide the best placement possible: a home with a father and mother. A same-sex couple does not fulfill that requirement, and the adopting couple may be unwilling to admit that the child has been given a second-rate placement.

Same-sex couples desperately want to believe that in acquiring children they have done a brave thing and that any harm done to the child is not the result of their actions but of a homophobic society that does not validate diversity. Same-sex couples with children pretend—and force their children to pretend—that there is no difference between a permanently and purposely fatherless or motherless home and an intact biological family. They want to force everyone else (and in particular the schools) to promote this myth so that their children’s natural desire for a father or mother is not validated.

Given the power of the “no difference” myth, it is not surprising that researchers like Regnerus and Marks would find themselves attacked by defenders of the progressive orthodoxy.¹⁵

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- ¹Mark Regnerus, “How Different Are the Adult Children of Parents Who Have Same-Sex Relationships? Findings from the New Family Structures Study,” *Social Science Research* 41 (2012): 752–770; and Loren Marks, “Same-Sex Parenting and Children’s Outcomes: A Closer Examination of the American Psychological Association’s Brief on Lesbian and Gay Parenting,” *Social Science Research* 41.4 (July 2012): 735–761.
- ²Barbara Dafoe Whitehead, “Dan Quayle Was Right,” *Atlantic Monthly*, April 1993.
- ³William Salentan, “Back in the Gay: Does a New Study Indict Gay Parenthood or Make a Case for Gay Marriage,” *Slate*, June 11, 2012.
- ⁴Mark Regnerus, “The Gay Parents Study, Entry 3: When I Say ‘Probabilities,’ the Public Hears ‘Certainties,’” *Slate*, June 21, 2012.
- ⁵William Salentan, “The Gay Parents Study, Entry 4: Have I Convinced You That You’re Wrong?” *Slate*, June 21, 2012.
- ⁶Elizabeth Marquardt, Norval Glenn, and Karen Clark, *My Daddy’s Name Is Donor: A New Study of Young Adults Conceived through Sperm Donation* (Institute for American Values: NY, 2010).
- ⁷Nanette Gartrell et al., “The National Lesbian Family Study: 4—Interviews with the 10-Year-Old Children,” *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry* 75.4 (2005): 518–524; and Nanette Gartrell et al., “The National Lesbian Family Study: Interviews with Mothers of 10-Year-Olds,” *Feminism and Psychology* 16.2 (2008): 175–192.
- ⁸Marquardt, Glenn, and Clark, “My Daddy’s Name Is Donor,” 72.
- ⁹Elizabeth Marquardt, “Sperm Donor Kids Speak Out: Our Biological Dads Matter to Us,” *Huffington Post*, January 19, 2011.
- ¹⁰Todd Essig, “Balancing the Rights of Donor Offspring with Those of Donors: But What About Parents,” *Forbes*, June 30, 2011.
- ¹¹Caroline Gammell, “Lesbian Couple Becomes ‘First Same Sex Couple to Sign Joint Birth Certificate,’” *Telegraph*, April 19, 2010.
- ¹²*Ibid.*
- ¹³Margaret Somerville, “The Right to Know Those Who Gave Us Life,” *Mercatornet*, July 10, 2012.
- ¹⁴Susan Dominus, “Growing Up with Mom and Mom,” *New York Times Magazine*, October 24, 2004.
- ¹⁵Christian Smith, “An Academic Auto-da-Fé,” *Chronicle of Higher Education*, July 23, 2012.

