

The Campaign to Discredit Regnerus and the Assault on Peer Review

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The political vortex that surrounds academic peer review is nowhere better illustrated than in the case of Mark Regnerus. A tenured associate professor of sociology at the University of Texas at Austin, Regnerus published an article in the July 2012 issue of the peer-reviewed journal, *Social Science Research (SSR)*.¹ The article, “How Different Are the Adult Children of Parents Who Have Same-Sex Relationships?” coincidentally was published a few months after President Obama’s May 2012 White House interview with Robin Roberts of ABC News in which he endorsed same-sex marriage.² And it appeared in the midst of what the *New York Times*, in a review of *Victory: The Triumph of the Gay Revolution*, called “Banner Days.”³ Former stalwart opponents of same-sex marriage such as Institute for American Values president David Blankenhorn had just announced their changes of heart. National polls were showing dramatic swings of public opinion in favor of legalized gay marriage, and the issue was headed to the U.S. Supreme Court. Democrat and Republican senators and congressmen who had been adamantly opposed to same-sex marriage were discovering new convictions contrary to their previous views. By almost any

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, no. 4 (2012): 752–70.

²“Transcript: Robin Roberts ABC News Interview with President Obama,” ABC News, May 9, 2012, <http://abcnews.go.com/Politics/transcript-robin-roberts-abc-news-interview-president-obama/story?id=16316043#UXge8LXvvO4>.

³Rich Benjamin, “Banner Days,” review of *Victory: The Triumph of the Gay Revolution*, by Linda Hirshman, *New York Times*, June 21, 2012, Sunday Book Review, http://www.nytimes.com/2012/06/24/books/review/victory-by-linda-hirshman.html?pagewanted=all&_r=1&.

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reckoning, advocates of same-sex marriage had the cultural winds at their back. In this context, Regnerus's article stood out as a relative isolate.

The article is silent on same-sex marriage but took up the related issue of what happens to children whose custodial parent is involved in a same-sex relationship. Children raised in these circumstances had been the subject of both social scientific research and a focus of popular culture, most notably in the 2010 movie, *The Kids Are All Right*, about a donor-conceived brother and sister raised by a lesbian couple. Regnerus framed his research as a response to the social scientific studies.

An older consensus that children of parents in same-sex relationships did not flourish as well as other children had been called into question beginning with a 2001 article in the *American Sociological Review*, which argued that the “differences in outcomes” for children, whether raised in heterosexual or same-sex households, were insignificant.⁴ Regnerus explained that as he worked through the dozens of studies published after that, he was struck by the very small statistical samples employed, the non-random character of the samples, the absence of adequate controls, and the shift from scholars who argued “no difference” to those who argued that same-sex parents are “more competent than heterosexual ones.”

Regnerus was skeptical of the new orthodoxy, finding the “rapid pace” of the change in opinions “a bit suspect.” He explained:

Scientific truths are seldom reversed in a decade. By comparison, studies of adoption—a common method by which many same-sex couples (but even more heterosexual ones) become parents—have repeatedly and consistently revealed important and wide-ranging differences, on average, between adopted children and biological ones. The differences have been so pervasive and consistent that adoption experts now emphasize that “acknowledgement of difference” is critical for both parents and clinicians when working with adopted children and teens.

⁴Judith Stacey and Timothy Biblarz, “(How) Does the Sexual Orientation of Parents Matter?” *American Sociological Review* 66, no. 2 (2001): 159–83, <http://www.asanet.org/images/members/docs/pdf/featured/stacey.pdf>. Regnerus supplied a summary of his general argument in an article for lay readers: “Queers as Folk: Does It Really Make No Difference If Your Parents Are Straight or Gay?” *Slate*, June 11, 2012, http://www.slate.com/articles/double_x/doublex/2012/06/gay_parents_are_they_really_no_different_.html.

⁵Alicia Crowl, Soyeon Ahn, and Jean Baker, “A Meta-Analysis of Developmental Outcomes for Children of Same-Sex and Heterosexual Parents,” *Journal of GLBT Family Studies* 4, no. 3 (2008): 385–407. Timothy J. Biblarz and Judith Stacey, “How Does the Gender of Parents Matter?” *Journal of Marriage and Family* 72, no. 1 (2010): 3–22.

This ought to give social scientists studying gay-parenting outcomes pause—rather than lockstep unanimity. After all, many children of gay and lesbian couples are adopted.⁶

Regnerus pursued a study on a much larger scale, the New Family Structures Study (NFSS), which focused on comparing young adults (aged eighteen to thirty-nine) raised by same-sex parents and those raised in homes with their married biological parents. Regnerus and his colleagues screened over 15,000 Americans in the age cohort, making his study by far the largest ever attempted on this subject. His July 2012 *SSR* article was an overview of the results.

The article immediately attracted attention well beyond the community of scholars who work on family sociology. Regnerus had concluded that his data revealed “numerous, consistent differences, especially between the children of women who have had a lesbian relationship and those with still-married (heterosexual) biological parents.”⁷ This finding contradicted the beliefs (and hopes) of many Americans and appeared as well to offer the makings of an argument against same-sex marriage, although Regnerus made no such argument. The immediate fallout included a letter signed by more than two hundred “PhDs and MDs” to James Wright, the editor of *SSR*, questioning “the process by which this paper was submitted, reviewed, and accepted for publication.”⁸ The text of the letter was published in a blog, *The New Civil Rights Movement*, by “Scott Rose,” the pseudonym of gay rights activist Scott Rosenweig, who has dedicated a great deal of time and energy to attempt to discredit Regnerus.

Rosenweig called on the University of Texas at Austin (UT) to investigate Regnerus for “scientific misconduct,” and when UT responded by launching what it called “an inquiry to determine whether a formal investigation is needed,” Rosenweig promptly labeled the inquiry “an investigation.”⁹ As it

⁶Regnerus, “Queers as Folk.”

⁷Regnerus, “How Different Are Adult Children,” abstract, <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/23017845>.

⁸Scott Rose, “Bombshell Letter: 200+ PhDs and MDs Question Scholarly Merit of Regnerus Study,” *The New Civil Rights Movement* (blog), June 29, 2012, http://thenewcivilrights_movement.com/bombshell-letter-scores-of-ph-d-s-ask-for-retraction-of-regnerus-study/legal-issues/2012/06/29/42413.

⁹Ibid. Scott Rose, “Open Letter to University of Texas Regarding Professor Mark Regnerus’ Alleged Unethical Anti-Gay Study,” *The New Civil Rights Movement* (blog), June 24, 2012, http://thenewcivilrights_movement.com/open-letter-to-university-of-texas-regarding-professor-mark-regnerus-alleged-unethical-anti-gay-study/civil-rights/2012/06/24/41977.

turned out, UT could find no plausible grounds for an investigation and closed the inquiry. This, however, was far from the end of the matter.

Regnerus came under sustained attack, some of it in the form of criticisms of his analytical methods and handling of statistical data, but much more of it in the form of character assassination and vituperative denunciation. The latter deserves to be noted as providing the emotional atmosphere surrounding the academic critique. Regnerus responded to the main substantive points in a follow-on article in *SSR*, published four months after the original.¹⁰

There were nine points:

1. **His use of the initialisms LM and GF, for lesbian mother and gay father.** Regnerus's data dealt only with adult offspring who *reported* that one of their parents had a same-sex relationship and he had no way of knowing whether the parent self-identified as having a lesbian or gay orientation. Regnerus conceded the point and said he would henceforth use MLR (mother in a lesbian relationship) and FGR (father in a gay relationship).
2. **His comparison of MLR and FGR households to intact biological families (IBF).** The criticism was that this was comparing unstable households to stable ones, which unfairly biased the results against MLR and FGR households. Regnerus disputed the charge of unfairness. He pointed out that his study examined various degrees and kinds of household instability, including single-parent households without MLRs or FGRs. He also pointed out that the extremely low number of "stably-coupled" same-sex relationships made it impossible to compare only stable same-sex coupled households to stable heterosexual households.
3. **His choice of MLR and FGR as independent variables.** The criticism is another version of the concern over the problem of unstable households. It is possible that (already existing) household instability was a precipitating factor in some women and men becoming involved in same-sex relationships, in which case household instability ought to be the "key pathway," not the same-sex relationship. Regnerus allowed that the variables may be linked, but finds it scientifically misguided to attempt to submerge

¹⁰Mark Regnerus, "Parental Same-Sex Relationships, Family Instability, and Subsequent Life Outcomes for Adult Children: Answering Critics of the New Family Structures Study with Additional Analyses," *Social Science Research* 41, no. 6 (2012): 1367–77.

- the distinctive phenomenon (same-sex parents) in the less distinct one (family instability).
4. **His focus on unstable gay and lesbian relationships.** The criticism is that the predominantly unstable gay and lesbian relationships that showed up in Regnerus's sample were an artifact of the past, when such relationships were stigmatized, and that a more recent sample would show more stability. Regnerus replied that he didn't design the study to find unstable gay and lesbian parents, and his study is plainly of adults who grew up at a particular time. He notes data that shows same-sex marriages in Norway and Sweden are at higher risk of divorce than heterosexual marriages and that there is data suggesting higher breakup rates among contemporary same-sex couples in the U.S. as well.
 5. **The small number of stably-coupled lesbian families in his sample.** The criticism is part of a claim that the NFSS sample was non-representative. Regnerus found only two cases of MLR children living with their mothers and their partners in an uninterrupted household from age one to eighteen. He stands by his data.
 6. **The differences between his sample and the U.S. Census.** The census shows a higher percentage of children raised in households of two adult males or two adult females than showed up in Regnerus's sample. Regnerus replies that he surveyed not households but adult children; asked about their parents' sexual relationships, which the census does not do; and that the census is a snapshot of one moment in a household's history, while his study focused on an adult's memory of an entire childhood.
 7. **His failure to address "mixed-orientation marriages."** Some critics argued that the adults Regnerus surveyed were the products of "mixed-orientation" marriages and that his findings reflect that reality, not the same-sex relationships of the parents. Regnerus says he has no way of knowing whether the original marriages were "mixed-orientation," and his study does not address "the etiology of homosexuality." Rather, he has facts about the outcomes for children who spend some or all of their childhoods with a parent in a same-sex relationship.
 8. **His failure to address bisexuality.** As with the previous criticism, some critics venture the hypothesis that the parents were in many cases bisexual. Regnerus says he has no relevant data but the matter would be worth examining.

9. **His failure to account for foster care experiences.** Some critics point out that in the time period Regnerus studied through his adult respondents' recollections, gay and lesbian parents frequently adopted foster children or had their own children taken away and put in foster care. Either situation was conducive to poor outcomes. Regnerus went back to his data and found twenty-one cases of children who had some foster care experience. Three of these moved into a household with a MLR and her partner after being in foster care, four went into foster care after living in such a household, and the rest "display calendar data less apt to suggest either of these two scenarios." The data, in other words, vitiate the speculative hypothesis.

I offer the summary to illustrate the straining by Regnerus's critics to find faults in an otherwise exemplary work of social scientific scholarship. No work of empirical research, of course, is without faults, and all such work entails judgments about how to frame questions, set definitions, tally data, and trace relationships among categories. Regnerus's work, however, has been subject to a scorched-earth effort to discredit it.

Regnerus replied to his critics in one other important way. In November 2012 he deposited the NFSS data at the University of Michigan's ICPSR (Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research) data repository. This means that scholars who have institutional access to ICPSR have access to the data on which the article was based. That data is, in practical terms, public and other scholars are working with it. Regnerus's analyses are easily checkable and the study is openly replicable. More than six months have passed since he deposited the data and so far no one has come forward to say that it is of poor quality or that Regnerus's handling of it was flawed.

The effort to marginalize Regnerus's *SSR* article was not originally prompted by doubts about his methods, but by visceral dislike of his study findings. His critics, however, realize that a good measure of Regnerus's authority on his controversial topics derives from the publication of "How Different Are the Adult Children of Parents Who Have Same-Sex Relationships?" in a highly-regarded peer-reviewed journal. From the start, therefore, a great deal of effort by Regnerus's ideological opponents has been spent on discrediting *SSR*'s decision to publish the article in the first place.

At one level, the campaign to discredit Regnerus has flourished in the blogosphere, where individuals writing under blogonyms ("Dave in

Northbridge,” “Christian Dem in NC,” etc.) have kept close track of the affair. The bloggers, in turn, have watched the better-placed critics carry the campaign forward.

A member of the editorial board of *SSR*, Darren Sherkat, professor of sociology at Southern Illinois University at Carbondale, undertook his own review of Regnerus’s work. Sherkat emailed Scott Rosenweig in July 2012, “The peer review process failed here,” and Rosenweig published that email on his blog.¹¹ *SSR* also supplied the *Chronicle of Higher Education* with a draft of Sherkat’s “audit,” quoting it as finding fault with the peer reviewers:

[S]cholars who should have known better failed to recuse themselves from the review process.¹²

Sherkat also cited other reasons why Regnerus’s article should not have been published. The term “lesbian mothers” (see above) was used too loosely, and

Sherkat said that fact alone in the paper should have “disqualified it immediately” from being considered for publication.¹³

Sherkat also said of Regnerus’s article, in what the *Chronicle* described as a “concise” comment, “It’s bullshit.”¹⁴

In view of the large play that Sherkat’s review has received in the press and his celebrity in the blogosphere, it may be worth weighing the character of his own views. He shared them with Rosenweig, who might accurately be described as his confederate in attacking Regnerus’s reputation. Rosenweig later released the contents of Sherkat’s July 15 email. Some samples:

- Regnerus produced some exceptionally distorted and inferior research that should not have been published in a major general interest journal

¹¹Scott Rose, “BOMBHELL: Editor Darren Sherkat Admits Peer Review Failure of Invalid, Anti-Gay Regnerus Study,” *The New Civil Rights Movement* (blog), July 27, 2012, <http://thenewcivilrightsmovement.com/bombshell-editor-darren-sherkat-admits-peer-review-failure-of-invalid-anti-gay-regnerus-study/politics/2012/07/27/43778>.

¹²Tom Bartlett, “Controversial Gay-Parenting Study Is Severely Flawed, Journal’s Audit Finds,” *Chronicle of Higher Education*, July 26, 2012, <http://chronicle.com/blogs/percolator/controversial-gay-parenting-study-is-severely-flawed-journals-audit-finds/30255>.

¹³Ibid.

¹⁴Ibid.

(yes, you can quote me on that as well)—but that is not a violation of anything. He just sucks and is a political whore. He'll pay for it later in reputation loss.

- Believe me, I know there is a vast right wing conspiracy and that Mark Regnerus is a part of it!
- I am almost finished with my audit response, and I will send it to you very soon.
- I want to thank you and everyone else in the activist community for keeping this on the front burner. This will make a difference. Until this Regnerus controversy, people thought I was fucking psycho! Seriously. Read my blog. People didn't understand that a huge proportion of sociologists studying stuff like this are conservative activists! Well, now they know! How did this study get through peer review? The peers are right wing Christianists! I've been telling people this for a fucking decade! And, this was all about that.¹⁵

This, to put it mildly, is not the voice of someone likely to give a fair-minded and dispassionate assessment of the merits and flaws in a scholarly paper. Sherkat's partisanship and intemperateness, of course, do not preclude his also having valid criticisms to make of either the article or the peer review process.

As for the *SSR* article, Regnerus addressed the points made by Sherkat and others in his November 2012 rebuttal. Regnerus left unsaid that the alleged faults, taken on their own merits, were minor matters that would hardly have disqualified the article during peer review.

The attack on Regnerus has continued.

On one front, in February 2013 the University of Texas capitulated to an open records request to release the private emails of Regnerus to Rosenweig and Sofia Resnik, a reporter for the *American Independent*. Resnik wrote an article in her online journal, posted October 3, 2012, pointing out that Bradford Wilcox, director of the Witherspoon Institute's Program on Family, Marriage, and Democracy, had been a paid consultant to Regnerus's study from 2010 to 2012. The Program was also the study's principal funder. This double role in Resnik's eyes conflicts with Regnerus's statements he designed and implemented his own study.¹⁶ Her interest in Regnerus's email

¹⁵Rose, "BOMBSHELL: Sherkat Admits." The samples cited contain passages from Sherkat's July 15 email to Rose that were originally more fully posted by Rose on *The New Civil Rights Movement*, but that posting is no longer accessible.

¹⁶Sofia Resnik, "Witherspoon Scholar Was 'Paid Consultant' on Parenting Study," *American Independent*, October 3, 2012, <http://americanindependent.com/217646/witherspoon-scholar-was-paid-consultant-on-parenting-study>.

was an extension of her search for further information on how Regnerus and the Witherspoon Institute were connected.

After the University of Texas released Regnerus's private emails, the activist bloggers went to work. John M. Becker—who labels himself on his website as “Husband. Activist. Writer.”—posted a March 11, 2013, article headlined, “Explosive Documents Reveal Sham Regnerus ‘Study’ Was Rigged from the Start.” Becker offers selections from email conversations between Regnerus and people at Witherspoon, which include encouragements such as, “Do what is right and best, move on it, don’t dilly dally, etc.” and, “I would like you to take ownership and think of how would you want it done...rather than someone like me dictating parameters...but of course, here to help.”¹⁷

Becker also quotes a letter from the head of the Witherspoon Institute to the Bradley Foundation supporting Regnerus's grant application:

Until someone sponsors proper research comparing such families to those headed by gay and lesbian couples, these flawed studies will continue to lend credibility to the same-sex marriage movement, simply because there are still no other studies that address this question.¹⁸

To deem these “explosive documents” or to judge that they show that Regnerus's study was “rigged” is to accept a very low standard of evidence. Mostly what they show is that Regnerus had attracted the support of an institute that regarded his research as important and likely to eventuate in results that would support moral and ethical principles that align with its mission. The Ford Foundation and virtually every grant-giving philanthropic organization does this day in and day out.

The attack on Regnerus, however, is so starved for actual evidence of significant mistakes in the study's methods and analysis that it has long since moved on to the search for unseemly motives, conspiracies, and deception.

The most recent venture in this direction is an emergency petition for writ of mandamus for violation of the public records act filed by John M. Becker in circuit court in Florida. Becker seeks to force the University of Central Florida to turn over the email records of James Wright—the editor of *Social*

¹⁷John M. Becker, “Explosive Documents Reveal Sham Regnerus ‘Study’ Was Rigged from the Start,” *John M. Becker* (blog), March 11, 2013, <http://www.johnmbecker.com/2013/03/11/sham-regnerus-study-was-rigged-from-the-start/>.

¹⁸Ibid.

Science Research—in connection with Regnerus’s article. *KnightNews.com* quotes Becker (“LGBT activist, writer and blogger”) as explaining, “My interest in filing this Sunshine Law Request is to discover the truth about the peer review and publishing of the Regnerus paper, which is unknown at this point.”¹⁹

Open records requests such as these are to be understood as requests for usable information at one level but, at another level, as efforts to intimidate and to harry the target. Wright, the editor, is being pursued in large part because the campaign to impugn Regnerus has stalled. His article remains in print and as authoritative as it was when he published it. If it has serious errors in method or analysis, the long effort to find and expose them has so far failed to bring them to light.

The tactic of turning on the editors of journals that publish unwelcome research has been with us for some time. It was widely on display a few years ago when the “Climategate” emails from the University of East Anglia Climate Research Unit showed several prominent researchers colluding to “punish” editors who had accepted research reports that contradicted the global warming orthodoxy of the moment.

Yet another form of marginalization appears to be emerging within Regnerus’s own department at the University of Texas. As I write, a conference is about to be held, sponsored by the sociology department, titled “The Austin Summit on LGBT Families.”²⁰ Regnerus, who must be counted as among the handful of leading world authorities on the topic, was not invited. The speakers are all prominent figures on the other side of the debate.

“Peer review” remains for many the inviolable standard for scientific and scholarly research, but if research articles that present material intensely disliked by activists do manage to get through the sieve of peer review, an effort must be made to show that the inviolable standard has been tampered with. “The peers are right wing Christians!” thunders Prof. Sherkat. The gates of reasoned inquiry shake. Will they hold fast?

In view of our ever more intensely politicized academic disciplines, our ever more abundant partisan activists policing what is sayable, our ever faster

¹⁹Jacob Sadowsky, “Activist Files Public Records Lawsuit against UCF Trustees, Hitt,” *KnightNews.com*, April 17, 2013, <http://knightnews.com/2013/04/activist-files-public-records-lawsuit-against-ucf-trustees-hitt/>.

²⁰“The Austin Summit on LGBT Families,” Department of Sociology, University of Texas at Austin, Austin, TX, April 26, 2013, <https://www.utexas.edu/cola/depts/sociology/the-austin-summit-on-lgbt-families/overview.php>.

technology for assembling virtual mobs—more than two hundred Ph.D.s and M.D.s!—our ever greater heedlessness for academic standards, and our ever greater alacrity for weaponizing the law to intrude on personal privacy, the gates of reasoned inquiry are none too secure. Peer review is a nice principle. But it can withstand only so many batterings the likes of the campaign to discredit Mark Regnerus.