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Controversial Gay-Parenting Study Is Severely Flawed, Journal's Audit Finds

July 26, 2012, 10:57 pm By Tom Bartlett



Mark Regnerus

The peer-review process failed to identify significant, disqualifying problems with a controversial and widely publicized study that seemed to raise doubts about the parenting abilities of gay couples, according to an internal audit scheduled to appear in the November issue of the journal, Social Science Research, that published the study.

The highly critical audit, a draft of which was provided to The Chronicle by the journal's editor, also cites conflicts of interest among the reviewers, and states that "scholars who should have known better failed to recuse themselves from the review process."

Since it was published last month, the study, titled "How Different Are the Adult Children of Parents Who Have Same-Sex Relationships?," has been the subject of numerous news articles and blog posts. It has been used by opponents of same-sex marriage to make their case, and it's been blasted by gay-rights activists as flawed and biased.

The study's author, Mark Regnerus, an associate professor of sociology at the University of Texas at Austin, even made the cover of The Weekly Standard. In the illustration, he is strapped to a Catherine wheel that's being tended by masked torturers.

Like Regnerus, the editor of Social Science Research, James D. Wright, has been at the receiving end of an outpouring of anger over the paper. At the suggestion of another scholar, Wright, a professor of sociology at the University of Central Florida, assigned a member of the journal's editorial board—Darren E. Sherkat, a professor of sociology at Southern Illinois University at Carbondale—to examine how the paper was handled.

Sherkat was given access to all the reviews and correspondence connected with the paper, and was told the identities of the reviewers. According to Sherkat, Regnerus's paper should never have been published. His assessment of it, in an interview, was concise: "It's bullshit," he said.

Among the problems Sherkat identified is the paper's definition of "lesbian mothers" and "gay fathers"—an aspect that has been the focus of much of the public criticism. A woman could be identified as a "lesbian mother" in the study if she had had a relationship with another woman at any point after having a child, regardless of the brevity of that relationship and whether or not the two women raised the child as a couple.

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



Darren E. Sherkat

In his audit, he writes that the peer-review system failed because of "both ideology and inattention" on the part of the reviewers (three of the six reviewers, according to Sherkat, are on record as opposing same-sex marriage). What's more, he writes that the reviewers were "not without some connection to Regnerus," and suggests that those ties influenced their reviews.

He declined to be more specific in an interview, saying that he was obligated to protect their identities. "Obviously," he concluded, "the reviewers did not do a good job."

At the same time, he sympathizes with the task of the overburdened reviewer inclined to skim. Because of how the paper was written, Sherkat said, it would have been easy to miss Regnerus's explanation of who qualified as "lesbian mothers" and "gay fathers." If a reviewer were to skip ahead to the statistics in the table, it would be understandable, he said, to assume that the children described there were, in fact, raised by a gay or lesbian couple for a significant portion of their childhoods.

In reality, only two respondents lived with a lesbian couple for their entire childhoods, and most did not live with lesbian or gay parents for long periods, if at all.

The information about how parents are labeled is in the paper. Regnerus writes that he chose those labels for "the sake of brevity and to avoid entanglement in interminable debates about fixed or fluid orientations." Sherkat, however, called the presentation of the data "extremely misleading." Writes Sherkat: "Reviewers uniformly downplayed or ignored the fact that the study did not examine children of identifiably gay and lesbian parents, and none of the reviewers noticed that the marketing-research data were inappropriate for a top-tier social-scientific journal."

He also had harsh words for an accompanying paper in the same issue by Loren D. Marks, an associate professor of family, child, and consumer sciences at Louisiana State University at Baton Rouge. Marks wrote a review of papers that had been published on the children of same-sex parents, taking the authors of those papers to task for using "small convenience samples" that are not generalizable, among other failings.

Sherkat writes that the Marks paper is "a lowbrow meta-analysis of studies" that was "inappropriate for a journal that publishes original quantitative research." Sherkat, in an interview, said that Marks didn't perform a true meta-analysis of the studies and instead simply wrote summaries of the results. Marks could not be reached for comment.

That said, Sherkat did not find that the journal's normal procedures had been disregarded, or that the Regnerus paper had been inappropriately expedited to publication, as some critics have charged. He also vigorously defended Wright, the editor. "If I were in Wright's shoes," he writes, "I may well have made the same decisions."

Because the reviewers were unanimously positive, Wright had little choice but to go ahead with publication, according to Sherkat. He goes on: "My review of the editorial processing of the Regnerus and Marks papers revealed that there were no gross violations of editorial procedures—the papers were peer-reviewed, and the 'peers' for papers on this topic were similar to what you would expect at *Social Science Research*."

As for accusations that Wright was part of a conservative conspiracy, as some have suggested, Sherkat deems that "ludicrous."

Sherkat was an early critic of the paper, even before he was chosen to conduct the audit. He also said in an interview that he had "little respect for conservative religiosity" and believes that Regnerus and some other socially conservative scholars push a political agenda in their academic work. In a paper published last year, he wrote about how religion and political affiliation affects support for same-sex marriage.

"There should be reflection about a conservative scholar garnering a very large grant from exceptionally conservative foundations," he writes in the audit, "to make incendiary arguments about the worthiness of LGBT parents—and putting this out in time to politicize it before the 2012 United States presidential election."



James D. Wright

Sherkat considers Regnerus to be "a bright young scholar," and, years ago, he wrote a letter of recommendation for him. Sherkat believes that Regnerus, whom he has known for two decades, made a decision to push a conservative political agenda in his academic work a number of years ago, and that this paper is evidence of it.

Regnerus wrote in a blog post that he is "at a point in my career where I'm less concerned about making my professional peers happy."

Regnerus declined to sit for an interview, citing the University of Texas' continuing inquiry into the paper. But when asked by e-mail if Sherkat was a fair arbiter in this case, he replied: "He was appointed to undertake the audit. I won't offer subjective perceptions of fairness or lack thereof."

Wright, the editor, provided *The Chronicle* with a draft of his response to the controversy, which will also appear in the November issue of the journal. He writes that two of the six reviewers were paid consultants to the New Family Structures Study, of which this paper is a part (in addition, two of the three commentators on the paper in the journal had been paid consultants on the new-family study, a fact that was divulged at the time the paper was published).

Wright mentions that they made this known to him, assured him it would not affect their judgment, and said that he trusts his reviewers to "check their ideological guns at the referee's door." He notes, too, that it's not unusual for scholars who have been consultants at some point on a project to later serve as referees.

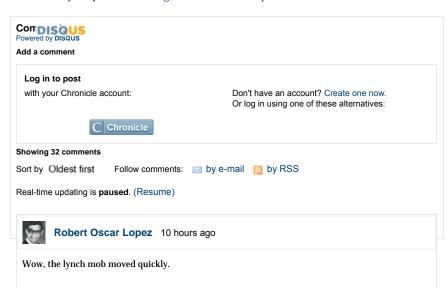
Wright has suffered sleepless nights since the publication of Regnerus's paper, and has received a steady stream of angry e-mails, from both colleagues and irate strangers. In his response, he writes that accusations that he was trying to foster gay-bashing are "hurtful and preposterous" and that he also believes, along with critics of the paper, in civil rights for gay people and lesbians.

In his audit, Sherkat reveals that all the reviewers declared that the paper would generate "enormous interest." Enormous interest leads to citations and downloads, which is how a journal's relevance is judged. The higher the impact of its papers, the greater its prestige. Wright acknowledges that he was excited about the interest the paper would no doubt inspire, and he wonders in retrospect if "perhaps this prospect caused me to be inattentive to things I should have kept a keener eye on."

That excitement was backed up by unanimous positive support from all reviewers. As Sherkat writes: "[I]t is unfair to expect Wright to hear the warning sirens when none were sounded by the reviewers."

Wright points out (as Regnerus himself wrote) that the paper could be read as supportive of gay marriage because it seems to indicate that more-stable households produce less-troubled children. "This does not sound like spiteful gay-bashing to me," Wright contends in his response. "It sounds like a perfectly reasonable conclusion."

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This is truly very sad. I apologize to Mark Regnerus on behalf of my country and profession. His study pointed out serious flaws with prior research, which was biased (and often funded) with bias in the opposite direction.

As a card-carrying bisexual, I find it sad that gays have now imposed a singular model of what constitutes a happy GLBT life. You have to be a gay version of Ozzie and Harriet, you need to follow one politically advantageous model, you can't have difficulties or hardships in your life, because that makes you somehow not "representative" of who gay people are. That's what I am seeing in the article above, as gay activists discounted a vast range of people from the definition of "lesbian mother" and "gay father," literally censoring any scholarly discussion of life experiences that deviate from the orthodox narrative of middle-class gay normalcy, no matter how common it is for people not to fit into their categories.

In the rush to present gays as normal, activists have brushed over the fact that being gay is very hard, and for reasons that are only partly due to stigma. By hiding the hardships that come with the lifestyle, gays make it that much harder to converse openly about the best way to find happiness for people regardless of their orientation. I still think civil unions are a better route than marriage. I still think cooperative foster care working with the biological parents (and committing to improving the biological parents' lives as opposed to just taking their kids' custody) is better than pushing a bizarre heteronormatized system of surrogacy, blind adoptions, and exclusive custody. You can love your kids and do all the best for them, but chances are if you insist on raising them exclusively in an all-gay home environment without any contact with a third party who's a biological parent, you are adding unnecessary hardship.

Regenerus's study could have occasioned a frank conversation about these things and fostered more honesty. Instead we have silence and everyone being dumbstruck while thousands of kids are dragooned into a gay parenting system that is making a lot of people increasingly uneasy, with good reason.

It's a Pyrrhic victory. Drive obvious observations like the ones put forward by Regnerus into the shadows, and then the dissimulation and deception metastasize. You can silence scholars who disagree, but you can't eliminate the basic reality that growing up being raised by a gay couple is harder than being raised by a straight couple. Slather layers of polish on your arguments and the underlying truth will corrode the whole project from within.

35 people liked this. Like

bunga7 3 hours ago

Out of curiosity, Robert, where did you get your "bisexuality card?" Having looked over some of your publications, you clearly have a bias as well. Perhaps, like Regenerus, you should admit that bias. I would expect that being a scholar you'd know better than to make statements ("...but you can't eliminate the basic reality that being raised by a gay couple is harder...") without rigorous studies, using strong methodologies. Instead, you let your own bias show through. One of the first things we learn as young scholars is to leave your bias at the door. If Regenerus was unable to do so, and clearly he wasn't, he should have stuck to other subject matter.

28 people liked this. Like

JD Eveland 2 hours ago Speak for yourself. I'm sorry that your life as a bisexual man is so cripplingly awful that you just can't resiste letting everybody else know about it. As a gay man of many years standing, and a sort-of-straight man before that - and incidentally, the father of a wonderful, happy, eminently successful daughter - I must say that my life is certainly no harder than anyone else's, and a heckuva lot less hard than many. Projecting one's own miseries onto the whole population of LGBT parents with no support except for loud ssertion is hardly a recipe for sound public policy recommendations. Even less sound is constructing meretricious pseudostudies out of bad data, sneaking them into a journal by fudging and faking the review process, and them complaining loudly about "research discrimination" when found out. Regnerus could not have written so many lies dressed in social science suits by accident or even stupidity - it was clearly an exercise calculated to mislead from the start. Lopez is just one more ideological false-flag operation aimed at fighting a rear-guard action against the truth.

39 people liked this. Like

jcisneros 41 minutes ago

Dr. Lopez, you simply cannot have it both ways. I have read a fair sampling of your postings

here, and you most often use your bisexuality in a pejorative way. In one posting you talked about coming to grips with your sexuality through prayer and reflection and then went on to state that your prayer and reflection brought you back to a heterosexual marriage and life.

Far be it from me to criticize how you live your life. I too, in my early years faced an uphill battle because of who and what I am (now an openly gay man). In my teenage years as a Roman Catholic I was deeply closeted, I prayed for change, I prayed to be made straight. It took until I was 22 for me to come to realize that I am what I am, and there is nothing wrong with being gay. Well, actually that was the beginning of my personal acceptance of what I am...not a clearly defined moment.

Believe me Robert, I am sympathetic. People and circumstances surrounding life can be terribly crushing. But those circumstances of my life are part of what makes me who I am.

But I am not sympathetic to Mark Regnerus. He demonstrably "cooked the books" with his study. He sought a specific result and manipulated his study to make it meet his expectations. He took money from people whose agenda is to deny equality to LGBT folks and he somehow found a way to get his paper refereed by people sympathetic to his beliefs. Even if Dr. Regnerus had nothing but the best of intentions...which I am fairly confident he did not, taking money from conservative anti-gay forces puts an agenda in play. Something you and other conservatives always accuse us liberals of ...putting an agenda in play. Everyone has a bias, and everyone has an agenda, Dr. Lopez, regardless of political ideology. How responsible scholars acknowledge and deal with those biases is part of the process of research and publication.

Let us be frank for a moment. Being a parent is difficult. Children do not come issued with owners' manuals. Gay and straight parents both have hard roads ahead of them, and gay and lesbian parents do have the added burden of social opprobium from certain quarters.

But Regnerus's study was not designed to expose and put scholars in a place where a productive debate about those particular difficulties would be possible. His study was designed to authoritatively disqualify gays and lesbians as parents, that was what those conservative think tanks paid him to do.

~JC

4 people liked this. Like

dashwood 10 hours ago

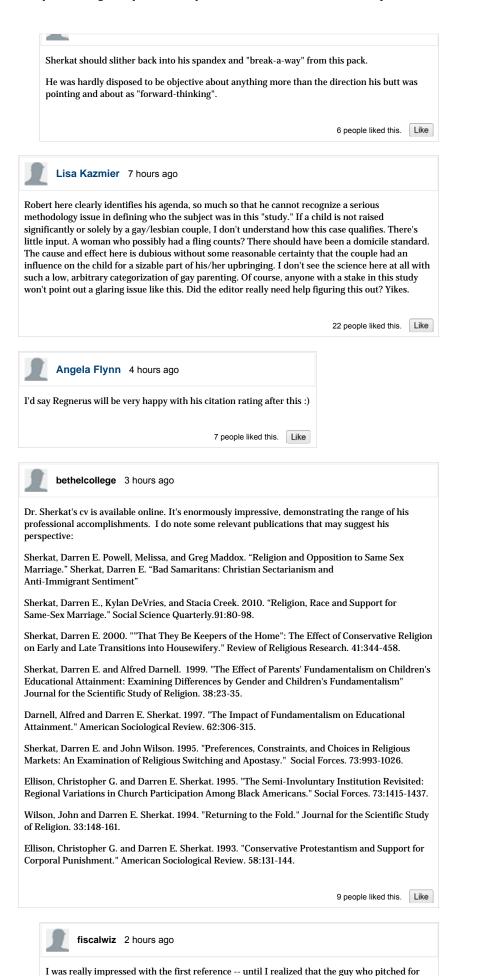
Sherkat is not an appropriate person to have conducted a review of the publication process. The fact that he was a member of the editorial board of Social Science Research and "an early critic of the paper" makes him an inappropriate choice to have conducted this inquiry in the first place. He is hardly a detached observer here, and it is irresponsible to have placed him in a position to conduct this inquiry.

What kind of incompetent inquiry is this? You have an original critic of the paper who then becomes an evaluator of the degree to which the publication process was conducted in an appropriate professional manner on a paper on which he was an early critic. The evaluator would seem to have a political agenda himself, insofar as the unpleasant things that he has to say about religious conservatives would seem to predispose him toward a particular view on these matters. Is this a person who could be expected to practice scholarly detachment and render an unbiased judgment on a paper that presented findings that would seem to stand is such sharp contrast to the views of someone with such contempt for religious conservatives? Further, the evaluator falls all over himself to praise and defend the editor of the journal, who we know asked him to conduct the inquiry in the first place. For Sherkat to cast such aspersions on the editorial process and then to suggest that he might have done the same thing if he were editor suggests a considerable amount of muddled thinking on his part. Either the editorial process is flawed or it is not.

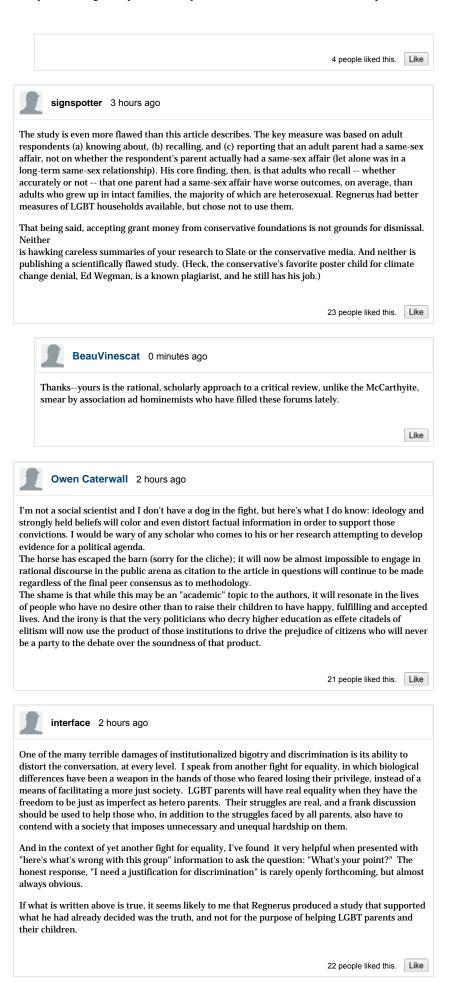
From this story, it appears that Sherkat suggests that the editorial process was fine but that the decision to publish the Regnerus was not. The fact is that this is one person's opinion of the publishability of the Regnerus and Marks papers, and in making this a headline story the Chronicle has made far too much of one person's opinion. In Sherkat we do not have a detached scholarly observer. It is an embarassment to Editor Wright and to Social Science Research to have created an inquiry to be conducted in this manner by a single biased observer who is a member of the SSR editorial board and who had already expressed an evaluation of the Regnerus paper.

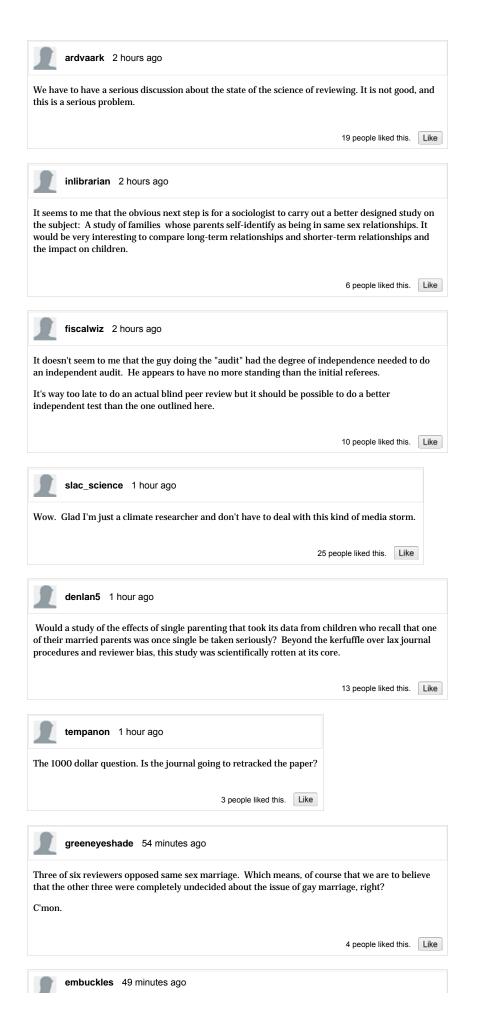
If there was a problem with the publication process of the journal, asking a single editorial board member known to be a critic of the paper that was the subject of the inquiry in the first place is completely inappropriate and, arguably, unethical. The editor should have asked a group of leading sociologists who represent a diversity of opinion and who were completely divorced from the operation of the journal to conduct the inquiry. That this was not done calls into serious question this entire sordid process.

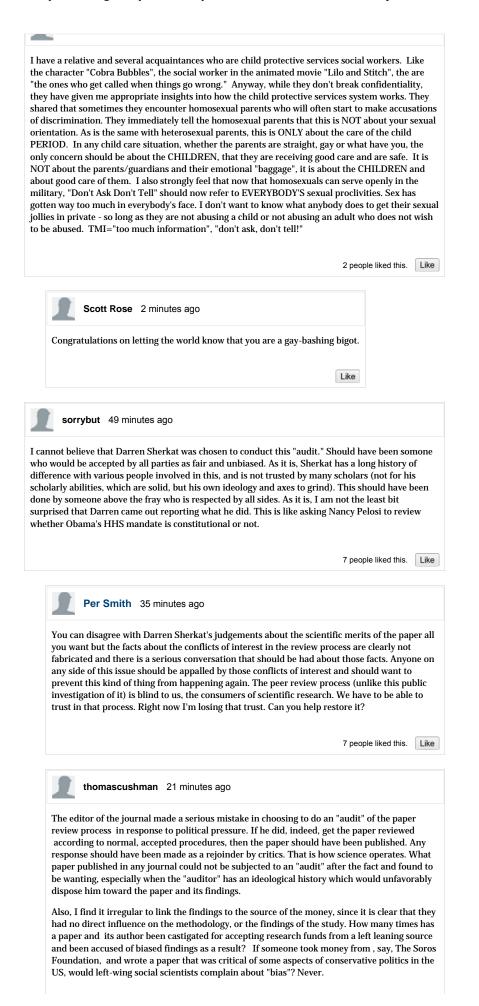
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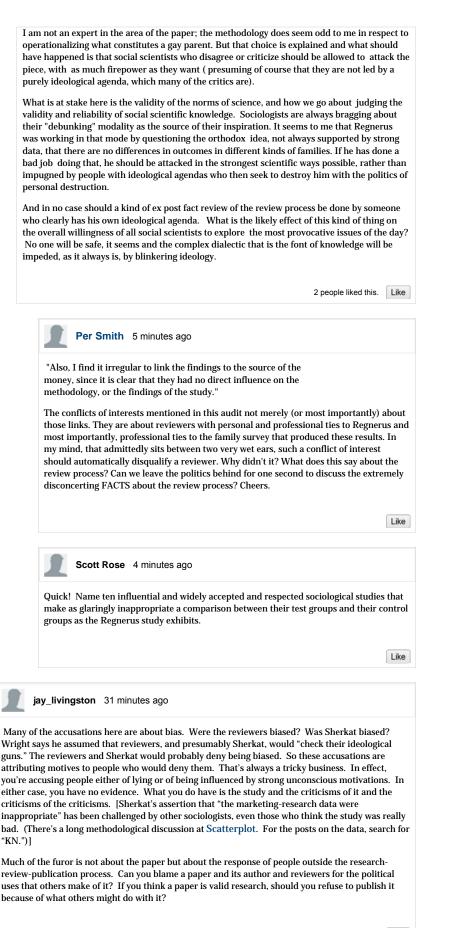


the Braves was Greg Maddux, not the Greg Maddox who is a co-author.



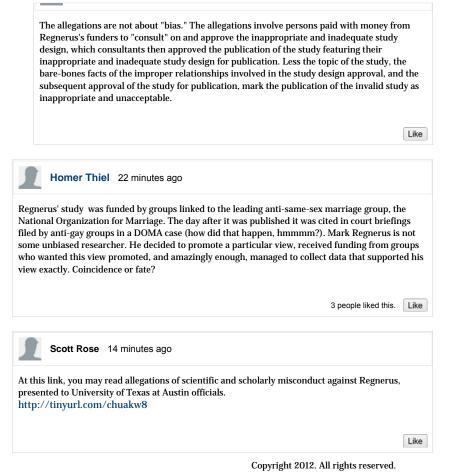






1 person liked this. Like

Scott Rose 6 minutes ago



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