



Family Policy Brief

Same-Sex Parenting and Junk Science

“No one should pay any attention to studies that are poorly done. They are just some stories, they really are not science.” Dr. Linda Waite

One of the misleading claims commonly made by homosexual activists and their allies is that social science research proves that there are no significant differences in the social and psychological outcomes for children raised by same-sex “parents” when compared to those raised by heterosexual parents. (The term “parent” will be used for convenience, but with the recognition that no more than one member of a same-sex couple raising a child can be the biological parent.) However, independent evaluation of the studies commonly used to support these assertions have concluded that all of them fall far short of the minimum standards the social science disciplines require to be met for research findings to have any validity.

To make matters even more serious, these independent analysts find that the results of this research are often misrepresented by the researchers themselves, and even more often by those, such as these homosexual activists and their allies, who try to use them to make their case. In short, this whole body of research has to be considered as little more than “junk science,” that is often misapplied and misrepresented. Because these flawed studies are constantly being used to try to support such policies as legalizing same-sex marriage, promoting same-sex adoption, same-sex foster care and technologically-assisted conception for same-sex couples, it is important to more fully understand the criticisms of these studies.

Researcher bias, whether intentional or inadvertent, is more likely in the social sciences than in the physical sciences. It is easy to get invalid results when doing social science research, even when the researcher is attempting to do good science. This is because with social science research there are many variables that are difficult to control or even to identify. Studying the outcomes of children raised in different home environments is very different from performing a chemistry experiment in a laboratory. Recognizing these potential problems, the social science establishment has agreed to a set of accepted social science research standards to reduce the potential for flawed or erroneous research results to the maximum degree possible. These include such things as randomly selecting subjects for the research, using techniques to measure outcomes that are as free from bias as possible, and studying a large enough number of subjects to apply rigorous statistical tests from which to draw valid conclusions. An additional safeguard is “peer review” of the studies by independent social scientists who determine if the minimal accepted standards were met. These peers, who are supposed to be unbiased researchers not involved in the study but experts in the field, critique the studies and must be satisfied that they are credible before the research is published in credible scientific journals, hence the term “peer reviewed journal.” Research that does not appear in a peer reviewed journal must automatically be given lower credibility than one that does, but the fact that research appears in such a journal does not automatically mean that it can be accepted as accurate.

When held to the minimum standards of social science research, virtually all of the same-sex parenting research studies published to date have been found by other social scientists to be deficient for a wide range of reasons. Many of the researchers in this area are themselves homosexuals as well as activists for “gay rights.” This could be a source of subconscious bias even in investigators who want to be as objective and professional as possible. Other problems with this body of research include using very small size samples in some of these studies or relying on “self reporting” by the same-sex parents themselves of the traits or characteristics of their children.

Obviously, there is a high degree of personal and vested interest among these same-sex parents in representing their children to be as normal as possible, and this is a major potential source of error. In other studies, the children being raised by two lesbians were being compared to children being raised by single mothers, another clear design flaw.

Another serious problem arises when activists cite this “research” claiming that “same-sex parenting” is no different, so therefore we should legalize such things as same-sex marriage. Since most of this research deals with lesbian partners and not male homosexual partners, drawing conclusions from it that extend to all same-sex partners is misleading. Based on other solid research, it is certain that two men would parent very differently than two women.

In an exhaustive scientific review of these studies, Dr. George Rekers, Professor of Neuropsychiatry and Behavioral Science, Research Director for Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, and Chairman of Faculty in Psychology at the University of South Carolina School of Medicine, characterized these studies this way:

...the few studies available are biased with regard to subject selection in that they generally report on a small group of research subjects which are not randomly selected and which do not constitute a scientifically representative sample of homosexual parents and their children. Furthermore, although the research designs of the available studies are replete with numerous other methodological deficiencies, many of the authors make illegitimate generalizations or unwarranted conclusions from their flawed research studies. Thus, although the available research to date essentially constitutes a number of poorly designed, exploratory pilot studies, both the authors of the studies and many reviewers of the studies have concluded substantially more from these methodologically flawed studies than was warranted scientifically.¹

Dr. Rekers is not alone in pointing out the fatal flaws in all of this research. The late Dr. Steven Nock, Professor of Sociology and Director of the Marriage Matters Project at the University of Virginia said this in an expert witness affidavit filed in the 2001 Canadian *Halperin* same-sex marriage case:

In sum, all the articles offered by Professor Bigner, [an academic citing all of this research] including the study considered the most rigorous, cannot be taken as establishing the claim that scientific research shows no differences between the children of gay parents and the children of heterosexual parents in terms of gender identity or sexual orientation. (Complete affidavit, which is a long and technical but a very good review of the accepted methodological practices for good social science research, is posted on FWI Web site.)

In 2007, Dr. Alan Hawkins, Professor of Family Life at Brigham Young University, reviewed those

studies done since the evaluations by Drs. Rekers and Nock and concluded that:

With respect to woman/woman child-rearing and man/man child-rearing, a number of researchers have asserted that their studies show that children raised by homosexual persons or same-sex couples experience “no differences” in outcomes as compared to children raised by married couples. These child-rearing modes, however, have not been “adequately studied.” In other words, that body of research has not yet matured to the point that they meet the high standards for reliability and validity that rationally sustains strong conclusions. (Complete affidavit in the Iowa same-sex marriage case is posted on the FWI Web site.)

Unfortunately, as Dr. Rekers has noted, in addition to the methodological flaws in the studies on same-sex parenting, there also appears to be intentional misrepresentation of their own studies by some of the researchers.

This became evident to Dr. Norval Glenn and Thomas Sylvester in an analysis of the trends in social science research with respect to the importance of family structure to the development of children. They reviewed all 266 scholarly articles on this question that were published between 1977 and 2001 in the prestigious *Journal of Marriage and Family*. They found that this research increasingly demonstrates the importance of family structure to children’s development and proves that both fathers and mothers make unique contributions to their children’s success and that the best place for children is in a family headed by their married biological parents. (This growing consensus in the research, by itself, suggests that same-sex parenting, a radically different family structure, would not fare as well as heterosexual biological parenting or even parenting by a heterosexual couple where one or neither is the biological parent.)

In the course of their analysis, Glen and Sylvester also identified frequent disturbing mischaracterization of this research, including the same-sex parenting research, that purports to find no differences or downplays the importance of family structure. They warn that “some of the arguments, rhetorical devices, and modes of data interpretation” being used by those researchers “are so unconventional and contrary to accepted ‘best practices’ that ideological bias is the only reasonable explanation for them.”²

Reviewing this same research, the French Parliamentary Commission Report on the Family and the Rights of Children found that:

*During the [commission’s] deliberations, it was not formally demonstrated that approving legal filiation with two fathers or two mothers has no effect on the building of the child’s identity... These scientific basis and the representativeness of the population samples studied were widely criticized and disputed at the hearings... The lack of objectivity in this area is blatant.*³

There are a number of other telling critiques of this research. For example, in a case brought to try to force same-sex marriage in Ireland, the Irish High Court, after reviewing extensive expert witness testimony on both sides of the claim of no significant differences for children, ruled that it was “not convinced that such firm conclusions can be drawn as to the welfare of children at this point in time.”⁴ In the legal challenge brought against Florida’s law prohibiting same-sex adoption, U.S. federal courts similarly found this research unpersuasive when they ruled to uphold the law.

Unfortunately, even professional associations such as the American Psychological Association, the American Medical Association and the American Academy of Pediatrics that have endorsed same-sex adoption cannot be trusted to competently evaluate and accurately report on the studies in this area. For example, after reviewing the same-sex parenting studies and analysis used by the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) to conclude there are no significant differences for children, Dr. Sharon Quick in an expert witness affidavit in the Iowa same-sex marriage case (posted on the FWI Web site) concluded:

Scientific studies on same-sex parenting are flawed...The body of research upon which [the AAP recommendation was made] consists largely of studies with methodological flaws significant enough to invalidate any conclusions...Contrary to the commonly stated conclusions that there are no significant differences in various outcomes for children of “homosexual” and “heterosexual” parents, many differences have been tabulated in the original studies. In fact, this same body of research contains findings and comments by the authors that raise concerns about the well-being of children in households with [same-sex] parents.⁵

Other experts have been similarly critical. Dr. Rekers accurately summarizes the conclusions all of them have reached:

In fact, the specific effect of homosexual parenting on child development remains an open question. Until methodologically rigorous research studies are conducted, empirical research has essentially nothing definitive to offer decision-makers in child custody, foster home placement, adoption, or artificial insemination cases. Until such sound scientific studies become available, such decision-making should remain in the realms of ethics, morality, and law.

Of most concern should be that some of these studies do appear to show significant and serious impacts on children being raised by same-sex individuals. While those results are not conclusive either, they do suggest that valid research should be conducted to determine any adverse impacts on children before taking such policy actions as expanding same-sex adoption, legalizing same-sex marriage or technologically-assisted same-sex child bearing.

¹ “Studies of Homosexual Parenting: A Critical Review.” George Rekers and Mark Kilgus, Regent University Law Review. 2001-2002, Vol. 14, No. 2, 343-382.

² <http://center.americanvalues.org/?p=71#about>

³ French Parliamentary Commission Report on the Family and the Rights of Children, pp 87-88. Executive Summary available on FWI Web site. <http://www.familywatchinternational.org/fwi/resources.cfm>.

⁴ *Zappone* decision by the Irish High Court, available on FWI Web site here. <http://www.familywatchinternational.org/fwi/resources.cfm>.

⁵ Conclusion, pp.4-5, Dr. Sharon Quick, expert witness testimony, available on the FWI Web site, <http://www.familywatchinternational.org/fwi/resources.cfm>.